

The Changing Meaning of Left-Right in UK Politics

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Abstract

After a turbulent decade of politics, dominated by the UK's referendum on and exit from the EU, how do British voters think about the left-right space of political competition? How do they place themselves on a left-right self-placement scale, and how does this relate to multiple dimensions of ideological values? Did the EU referendum create a new realignment or dealignment within the electorate, or did it simply reflect already existing divisions? The three papers in this thesis use an exploration of measures of ideology over ten years in British politics to explore these questions. Increasingly, as highlighted by the EU referendum, British politics has been dominated by issues on the cultural, rather than economic, dimension of political conflict. This thesis explores the way the mass public has increasingly incorporated their cultural values into their own left-right self-placement.

The first paper finds that economic values have become less predictive of left-right self-placement over time as cultural values have become more predictive of left-right self-placement, particularly for those on the right. The second paper finds that the EU referendum crystallised pre-existing ideological divisions within the Labour coalition, while it seemed to create new ideological divisions within the Conservative coalition. In my third paper, an original survey experiment finds that priming respondents on the cultural dimension shifts their left-right self-placement towards their cultural values. Alternatively, it finds no effect of priming on the economic dimension.

These papers demonstrate a shift in British politics in the last decade, where cultural issues have become more central to how voters define their left-right self-placement. This has disrupted the coalitions of the two major parties and provides the grounds for a realignment in British politics, where the cultural dimension will exist alongside or even replace the economic dimension.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The last decade of British politics has been a turbulent one. Since 2015, there have been four General Elections, six Prime Ministers, and a referendum that resulted in the UK's departure from the EU.

This project focuses on one aspect of British public opinion during this period - where people place themselves on the left-right self-placement scale, and how this relates to two dimensions of operational ideology. In a spatial conception of political behaviour, wherein parties aim to attract voters close to them in the ideological space, understanding how voters use the left-right terminology is essential. The weight that an individual places on one dimension of political values, such as their economic values, to their conception of left and right could impact how close they see themselves, and therefore potentially their likelihood of voting for, each political party. We can imagine that a voter that holds 'left-wing' positions on some issues yet 'right-wing' positions on other issues may find it difficult to determine whether they are 'closer' to a left- or right-wing party. Yet if we know, for example, that voters' left-right self-placements are best predicted by cultural values, it is more likely that it is this dimension will help them decide which party they sit closest to.

The trends observed from an investigation of ideology are indicative of a major shift in British politics in this period. Political competition in the UK appears to have evolved from

being organised largely around an economic divide to a cultural one. There are many related trends stemming from this shift, such as partisan realignment, and the declining ability of class to predict vote choice, replaced by age and education as demographic predictors.

This thesis focuses primarily on bottom-up voter behaviour. That is, it looks primarily at individual-level ideology over a focus on party-level factors that are also likely to affect aspects of political behaviour. That said, the behaviour of parties is of course integral to theories of political behaviour. The findings of this thesis demonstrate how voters use the left-right space, and therefore how parties move and present themselves within this space should be considered alongside the findings on individual-level ideology presented in this thesis.

This thesis' focus on ideology provides an insight into changes in political attitudes in the UK that might be missed by a study focused only on vote choice. The significant volatility in vote choice in the four elections in the UK during this period can make it difficult to make inferences about enduring changes to the linkages between parties and their voters; after each General Election there may have been a temptation to declare a new alignment between voters and parties that would have collapsed by the next election. Equally, an analysis of the salient issues in British politics would show the dominance of Brexit from 2016 onwards, and a resurgence of economic concerns due to a cost of living crisis in the build up to the 2024 General Election. Yet this thesis uses an analysis of two measures of ideology to demonstrate that the cultural dimension has become - and remained - increasingly central to voters' left-right self-placement over these ten years. This demonstrates a longer-term and enduring trend of an increasingly significant cultural dimension of British politics. Given the historic dominance of class and economic issues in UK politics, this finding suggests a fundamental shift in the political attitudes of British voters and the lines of political competition.

1.1 The Dynamic Nature of Left and Right

The conception of the political space as divided into the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ is a prominent feature of political science. This is particularly found in studies of party politics and public opinion which rely on the idea of ‘space’ and ‘distance’ to help us understand political systems. The idea of a ‘median voter’ which parties should appeal to, for example, only makes sense in a spatial conception of politics, where parties and voters can both be placed and positions compared. Equally, literature on congruence between parties and their voters relies on a spatial understanding of political competition. When this is measured in one-dimension, the space is almost always divided into ‘left’ and ‘right’. Whilst we increasingly consider party positions in multi-dimensional spaces, the unidimensional scale of ‘left’ and ‘right’ is still useful, especially as it reduces the complexity of political competition for voters. For this reason, much political science research still asks people to place themselves on a scale of ‘left’ and ‘right’.

The meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’ is dynamic, however, and it is not necessarily clear how left-right self-placements relate to other measures of ideology. The history of the terminology outlines the ability for the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ to evolve. The political terminology ‘left’ and ‘right’ are thought to have originated during the French Revolution, based on how politicians were seated in the French National Assembly. In this case, supporters of the monarchy sat on the right, while revolutionaries sat on the left. Yet, when we think of the left-right space now, we are unlikely to describe the poles as representing views towards monarchy. Instead, the dominant interpretation of the left-right terminology has been one which focuses on divisions over economic issues. Whilst not universal, this is evidenced by the frequent use of left-right terminology to represent the economic divide. For example, the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022) asks experts to place parties on many political issues. For the question which asks about economic issues, the poles of this dimension are labelled “extreme left” and “extreme right”. Yet, for the cultural GAL-TAN dimension, the poles are

labelled “Libertarian/Postmaterialist” and “Traditional/Authoritarian”. Evidently, political scientists have at least in some cases used the terminology of ‘left’ and ‘right’ interchangeably with economic divisions. Alternative dimensions of political conflict may be increasingly important (Kriesi et al., 2006) but they are generally assumed to be separate from left-right terminology.

At the mass voter level, cues about whether parties, policies or individuals are ‘left-wing’ or ‘right-wing’ remain a useful heuristic for simplifying politics. Yet, given the increased role of the cultural dimension in British political competition, the ways in which voters relate the labels of left and right to underlying dimensions of ideology may be shifting. For this, it is useful to identify and differentiate between symbolic and operational measures of ideology.

1.2 Two measures of ideology

This project distinguishes between two main measures of ideology that are widely used in political science. Ellis and Stimson (2012) define these as ‘symbolic’ and ‘operational’ ideology. These two terms are related but distinct concepts. Both aim to measure an aspect of ideology and should be correlated. How strongly they are related to one another provides one indicator of ideological constraint. Another indicator of ideological constraint is how aligned someone is along different dimensions of operational ideology.

Symbolic ideology is how someone describes their own ideology. In the US, Ellis and Stimson (2012) use a measure of whether someone thinks of themselves as liberal or conservative (and how strongly they think of themselves in these terms). In the UK and much of Europe, it is much more common to ask someone where they would place themselves on a scale of left-right. In this thesis I use the British Election Study question “In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on the following scale?” with an 11-point 0-10 response scale, where 0 is labelled ‘left’, and 10 is labelled ‘right’.

Operational ideology describes the latent set of attitudes and values that someone holds.

How operational ideology is measured is therefore context dependent, and may consist of more than one dimension. Ellis and Stimson (2012) primarily measure operational ideology through positions on economic issues. The economic dimension has traditionally been considered to be the first dimension of operational ideology in the UK (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The economic dimension distinguishes between those who prefer higher levels of taxation and government and spending ('the left') and those who would prefer taxes and spending to be lower, with less government intervention in the economy ('the right'). For much of the twentieth century, the major division in British politics was along this economic dimension, which ran alongside the cleavage of social class (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967).

Increasingly, the economic dimension of operational ideology is thought to intersect with a 'new' dimension. This second dimension is variously named and defined. It is generally thought to comprise of a dimension of 'cultural' attitudes. It has also been called a post-materialist dimension (Inglehart, 1990), a GAL-TAN dimension - contrasting Green / Alternative / Libertarian ideas with Traditional / Authoritarian / Nationalist ideas (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002), or a divide between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation (Kriesi et al., 2006). This dimension of operational ideology is also closely linked with the psychological measure of authoritarianism (Adorno, 1950; Altemeyer, 1988; Nilsson and Jost, 2020). The 'culturally liberal' side of the cultural dimension consists of those who favour multiculturalism, hold progressive views on topics such as gender and LGBT rights, and hold pro-environmental values. The 'culturally conservative' or 'authoritarian' side of the cultural scale generally involves people who prefer hierarchy, loyalty to the national group, and traditional values.

How do these measures and dimensions of ideology relate to one another? The two operational dimensions are often orthogonal at the individual level. This may be why they are often considered to be separate dimensions. At the party system level in Western Europe (including the UK), left economic ideas generally 'go with' culturally liberal ideas, and right economic ideas generally 'go with' culturally conservative ideas. However, this relationship

is context dependent. Globally, left-wing economics have been found to be more likely to go alongside culturally authoritarian ideas (Malka, Lelkes and Soto, 2019). Equally, even in parts of Europe where the party system compresses the two dimensions into one, there are many voters who fit outside this, and are forced to choose between voting for parties who represent either their economic views *or* their cultural views (van der Brug and van Spanje, 2009). The diagram in Figure 1.1 illustrates this problem. Traditional conservative parties are in the economic right and culturally conservative area of the political space, and left-liberal parties are in the economically-left and culturally liberal space. This leaves many voters in the left-authoritarian or right-liberal space forced to choose between parties which represent their views on only one dimension.

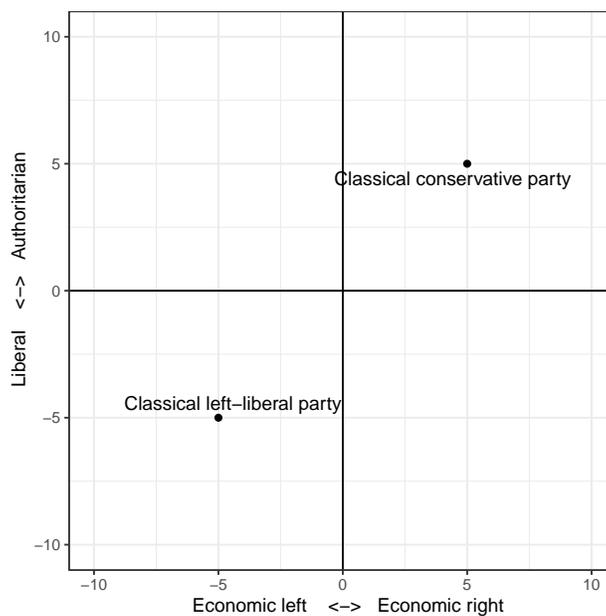


Figure 1.1: Two-dimensions of political space

This diagram demonstrates the positions of traditional conservative and left-liberal parties in the two-dimensional political space. The left-authoritarian and right-liberal quadrants are empty, forcing voters in these quadrants to choose between parties that represent their views on only one dimension.

Traditionally, British politics - and the left-right divide - has been dominated by the economic dimension of politics. This economic divide runs parallel to divisions of social class. In post-war Britain, the general trend was for working-class voters to vote for the

economically left-wing Labour Party, and middle-class voters to vote for the economically right-wing Conservative party. Cultural issues, especially those relating to race, became more salient over multiple waves of immigration during the latter half of the twentieth century, but the divisions between the two parties remained largely related to economics (Fieldhouse et al., 2023; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). However, alongside other European neighbours, cultural issues have become more central to political competition (Bornschieer, 2010; Inglehart, 1990; Kriesi et al., 2006).

Symbolic and operational measures of ideology are central to this thesis. In chapter 2, I analyse the relationship between operational and symbolic ideology directly. In Chapter 3, I use both measures of ideology as indicators of changes in the bases of support for the Labour and Conservative parties. In chapter 4, I test whether priming the linkages between symbolic ideology and each dimension of operational ideology impacts the relationship between symbolic and operational ideology.

1.2.1 Measurement of operational ideology

To measure operational ideology, I use the ‘values’ scales provided in the British Election Study which are separated into an economic dimension and a liberal-authoritarian dimension. In this thesis I therefore use the terminology of ‘values’ to discuss operational ideology. I also call the liberal-authoritarian dimension the ‘cultural’ dimension. I use two slightly different versions of the economic and cultural values scales - the questions included in the internet panel, used in chapter two and three, are outlined in the Chapter 2 Appendix. For my survey experiment in Chapter 4, I instead use the version of the values scale which is used in the cross-sectional post-election random probability version of the British Election study (Fieldhouse et al. (2025); questions are in the Appendix for chapter 4). This version has the advantage of using more balanced scales which should reduce acquiescence bias compared to a one-sided scale.

In order to turn these scales into single measurements of someone’s economic or cultural

values, I use Blackbox scaling (Poole et al., 2016), an extension of Aldrich-McKelvey scaling (Aldrich and McKelvey, 1977). I ran this scaling on responses to multiple value questions on each dimension, to create one score for economic values and one score for cultural values. I scale the economic questions and the cultural questions separately. This scaling weights each of the statements in order to create the latent ideological dimension scores. These weightings represent how much information each question provides about the latent dimension - for example, a question where lots of the respondents answer in the middle of the scale due to misunderstanding the question or non-attitudes would likely receive a low weight. Additionally, if the vast majority of respondents provide the same response to a question it is unlikely to provide much information about the latent dimension the scale is aiming to measure. However, a question that is highly divisive, with respondents divided along similar lines to other questions on the same dimension, will receive a higher weighting through the scaling methodology. An advantage of Blackbox scaling over Aldrich-McKelvey scaling is that it also allows me to include respondents with missing data - in the first two papers I include respondents who have missed up to one of the five questions. The scores created for each dimension have a mean of 0. I finally rescale the cultural and economic scales to have a range of 1 to ensure the coefficients for the economic and cultural dimension scores are comparable. As the original responses to the questions are skewed in a left-economic and culturally-conservative direction, a score of '0' reflects the mean response but not the centre of the range.

1.3 Realignment, Dealignment, and the Declining Role of Social Class

There is considerable debate about whether the increasing importance of cultural issues, at the expense of economic issues, might be described as a 'realignment' or 'dealignment' in British politics (Cutts et al., 2020; Fieldhouse et al., 2023). The idea of realignment comes

from studies of US politics. A ‘party alignment’ is the linkage between a group in society and a party that it traditionally votes for. A realignment is when there is a significant shift within the voter bases of each of the two political parties (Key, 1955; 1959). These shifts will generally be associated with changes in both demographic and issue-based divisions. For example, the economic ideological cleavage is closely related to class-based divisions in the electorate, while cultural disagreements are more likely to be related to rural/urban, religious, education, or age-based divides. A similar concept to realignment is ‘issue evolution’, where the foundations of political competition change because new issues become folded into the established left-right framework at the mass and elite level (Carmines and Stimson, 1986). Since it is difficult to pinpoint realignments and critical elections, the popularity of the ‘realignment’ terminology has varied over time (Nardulli, 1995).

A realignment requires new, enduring linkages between parties and voters. Dealignment has instead occurred if the old linkages between parties and voters have broken down and not been replaced. Indeed, given the volatility of the last decade of British politics, it is difficult to pinpoint linkages between groups of voters and parties that have endured. This is a frequent criticism of theories of critical elections, as much political change happens slowly over time (Carmines and Stimson, 1986). It is arguably only possible to pinpoint substantial and enduring changes in hindsight.

The 1997 general election has been seen as a critical election where social class declined in importance (Evans and Norris, 1999). This election was fought by a Labour party that had moved to the economic centre after losing four general elections to the Conservatives in a row between 1979 and 1992. This move towards the economic centre was widely seen as a movement away from the party’s working-class base, which was blamed for much of the weakening link between class and vote in the 2000s and 2010s (Cutts et al., 2020; SurrIDGE, 2018).

However, 1997 was not the first election where political scientists pointed out the weakening relationship between social class and voting between the Labour and Conservative

parties. In fact, the weakening alignment between class and vote choice can be traced to the 1960s where this alignment was noticed to be weakening as soon as it was defined (Butler and Stokes, 1974). There was much debate over whether class-based voting was truly declining up until the 1997 election (Scarborough, 1987). After 1997, class dealignment was more evident as the linkages between social class and parties continued to weaken. This may have been because the Labour and Conservative parties converged on economic policy during the elections of 1997, 2001, and 2005 (Evans and Tilley, 2012; 2017).

Despite evidence of weakening class alignments over time, economic attitudes continued to be a strong predictor of vote choice between the Labour and Conservative parties up to and including the 2015 general election (Evans and Tilley, 2017; Sanders and Brynin, 1999). While class *dealignment* could plausibly be detected for decades prior to this point, it could not be thought to be *realignment* until a new issue had taken the place of debates about the role of the state in the economy.

The ‘new’ issue dimension that has become an increasingly important cleavage in British politics is one of cultural issues. In the UK this divide is predominantly created by debates over immigration and multiculturalism. Unlike other European countries, attitudes towards the EU also fit well into this same cultural dimension (Jolly et al., 2022). In the post-war period, multiple waves of immigration have made the issue increasingly important to voters. Yet, the public’s attitudes towards immigration did not discriminate between Labour/Conservative voters during the first waves of immigration. Sobolewska (2021) highlights the ways in which post-war politicians such as Edward Heath sought to keep immigration outside of electoral competition. While Enoch Powell was highly popular for his anti-immigration stances, his notorious Rivers of Blood speech led to him being kicked out of the Conservative Party, keeping immigration as an issue largely outside the partisan divide between Labour and Conservative voters (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). Nevertheless, the Conservative party had acquired a reputation for being less favourable to immigration than Labour, which may have helped the party in the 1970 election (Studlar, 1978).

The EU referendum in 2016 marked a turning point where the British public were divided according to their cultural values, not their economic ones. Whilst the public had views on issues such as immigration before the referendum, it was in the general elections following the referendum where the parties were forced to take a position on the EU. In 2017, Labour's leader Jeremy Corbyn also committed to 'leaving' (albeit on different terms to the Conservatives), which reduced voting along Brexit lines. Yet, by 2019, the Conservative and Labour parties had distinct Brexit positions as Corbyn committed to holding a second referendum. Voters, too, now held identities as Leavers and Remainers that divided them along cultural lines (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2021; Tilley and Hobolt, 2023). The combination of the EU referendum in 2016, and the clearer pro- and anti-EU positions that the parties took on it in 2019, made voters self-aware of the possible gaps between themselves and the parties they had previously voted for (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). This was particularly significant for the cross-pressured voters; both Labour leavers and Conservative remainers.

The three papers in this dissertation deal with the issues of dealignment and realignment in some way. Chapter 3 does so most directly. Most arguments about realignment focus on alignments between parties and voters. Chapter 3 accordingly explores the ideological changes in the Labour and Conservative party bases around the Brexit referendum, and the extent to which these patterns could be described as a pre- or post-referendum phenomena. Chapters 2 and 4 also provide insights into the centrality of economic and cultural issues into the overarching left-right divide in UK politics. Due to the volatility in party voting and declining partisanship in British politics (Fieldhouse et al., 2023) the underlying ideological movements may provide the basis for a new political alignment *before* the political parties representing each side of this cultural cleavage have settled into place. While the 2019 election suggested the Conservative party would be the institution to represent culturally Conservative Britons, its collapse up to and beyond the 2024 general election, and the rising popularity of Reform UK, leaves it as an open question as to which party will move to represent this new electoral base.

1.4 Issue Importance and Issue Saliency

In this thesis I refer to issue importance and issue saliency, particularly in chapters 2 and 4. Often, individual-level issue importance is itself called ‘issue saliency’. However, I believe it is helpful to differentiate between the two concepts. When I refer to importance, as in Chapter 2, I refer to the individual-level responses one provides to a question about issue importance. When I focus on saliency, as in Chapter 4, I use a broader definition of the term, as is often used in survey psychology. In Zaller’s RAS model of public opinion (Zaller, 1992), a topic is salient if it is ‘top of the mind’ or immediately accessible, perhaps due to exposure of information about the issue. This aligns with the usage of ‘saliency’ in social psychology, where salient evidence is that which is brought most easily to mind (Taylor and Fiske, 1978). This concept of saliency is often the one used in political communication literature, too, where issues prominent in the media are considered to be salient (Edwards, Mitchell and Welch, 1995).

There are of course strong linkages between the concepts of individual-level issue importance and saliency. As per Zaller’s RAS model, if an issue is important to someone, it is more likely to be salient when they are making considerations about related issues. Equally, exposure to issues via television news affects which issues people deem important (Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Iyengar, Peters and Kinder, 1982). However, in this thesis I differentiate between individual-level issue importance and dimensional issue saliency.

1.5 Ten years in the UK as a case study

This project focuses on ideology in the UK between 2014-2024. This period of British politics is particularly interesting due to the Brexit referendum in 2016. This referendum acted as an shock to the political system wherein voters became acutely aware of political divisions that cross-cut existing party lines. Studying the British case also allows me to utilise data

collected from the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) in Chapters 2 and 3. The BESIP is a multi-wave panel study that collects frequent measures of ideology on large sample sizes of around 30,000 respondents per wave (Fieldhouse et al., 2024). This is an extremely useful resource that allows for a fine-grained analysis of individual-level factors and how these change over time. A multi-country analysis, which is more able to uncover the impact of country-level factors such as party systems would be complementary to the individual-level findings here. However, the BES provides a unique opportunity to assess the same questions responses on the two measures of ideology repeatedly for the same people, asked very frequently over ten years.

Some of the findings of this thesis may be most relevant to those interested in UK politics, such as Chapter 3's analysis of the impact of the EU referendum within the coalitions of the Conservative Party and Labour Party. That said, this chapter can provide a wider insight into how a cross-cutting issue, immediately made salient to all voters, can disrupt party coalitions. Equally the findings in Chapter 2 of the increasing importance of the cultural dimension echo findings from other studies on other European countries (De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013; Lachat, 2018). Chapter 4's findings on the ability for issues on either the economic or cultural dimension to prime left-right self-placements could also be relevant to other contexts, especially given the large base of left-authoritarians in many parts of Europe (Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann, 2014).

1.6 Note on subnational variation

This thesis uses data for the whole of Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales). The data used in these analyses are not limited only to England as these trends were also evident in Scotland and Wales. In Scotland particularly, the issues raised in this paper intersect with divisions over independence (Johns, 2018). To be sure, a subnational focus on these topics, and an inclusion of the role of national identities, would add an important extension to these

discussions, though they are beyond the scope of the present study. Appendix 2.D evaluates the results of Chapter 2 separately for England.

1.7 Non-ideological determinants of left-right self-placement and political behaviour

This thesis focuses on the relationship between left-right self-placement and the two dimensions of latent operational ideology. There are, of course, other possible determinants of left-right self-placement outside of latent ideology. For example, someone may see themselves as a left- or right-wing person due to another identity that they associate with the left-right space, rather than due to their opinion on issues. For example, someone may see themselves as left-wing due to their working-class identity.

Of course, an alternative explanation of political behaviour may skip the ideological step altogether; people may vote the way they do for non-ideological reasons, and, if someone does possess a left-right identification, this may have derived as a consequence of partisanship, rather than a summary of operational ideology, as this thesis argues. Many theories of voting argue that party identification is central to vote behaviour (Bartle and Bellucci, 2008; Campbell et al., 1960). Yet, partisanship has declined significantly in recent years in the UK (Fieldhouse et al., 2023; Heath, 2017). Other non-ideological drivers of vote choice might then be suggested to still be more important than ideology in vote choice - valence judgements of politicians, for example (Clarke et al., 2009). Yet, recent evidence demonstrates that, under the decline of partisanship, and an increasingly high level of vote switching between elections, voters seem to be shifting within 'blocs' of parties - between Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and Greens, or between the Conservative Party and the Brexit Party/Reform UK (Griffiths et al., 2026). This suggests that a spatial conception of voting, reliant on ideological considerations, is highly relevant to modern British politics.

1.8 Outline

All three papers in this thesis touch upon the themes of ideology measurement, realignment theories and issue salience. I focus particularly on these themes in the context of the last ten years of British politics, tracing them through the 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2024 general elections, as well as the EU referendum in 2016.

1.8.1 Chapter 2

In Chapter 2 I explore what the mass-level left-right space looked like in the UK between 2014-2024. I demonstrate that, when pooling the data across the whole time period, both economic values and cultural values are significant predictors of left-right self-placement. This demonstrates a certain level of ideological constraint among British voters, and suggests coherence between multiple dimensions of values. I then explore how this relationship between values and left-right self-placement varies both over time and across the left-right spectrum itself. Analysing the changes between each General Election wave of the BESIP data, I find that over each subsequent General Election starting with 2015, economic values predict left-right self-placement less well. While in 2015 and 2017, economic values are more predictive of self-placement than cultural values, by 2019 both value dimensions are equally predictive of left-right self-placement. By 2024, cultural values are more predictive of left-right self-placement than economic values. This change over time gives credence to the proposition that the meaning of left-right changed for voters over those ten years.

In chapter 2 I also discuss the asymmetry in the usage of the left-right space within the left-right scale itself. I find that, overall, those identifying on the left choose a self-placement position aligned most with their economic values while the right of the self-placement scale is organised along cultural values. On average, those identifying furthest to the right are least likely to provide a self-placement aligned with their economic values. They often hold economically centrist or even economically left values, seemingly at odds with their extreme

right self-placement. I also explore whether the changes observed over time are driven by individuals from specific parts of the left-right spectrum. I find that over the ten years, self-placements on the left-half of the scale become much more aligned with cultural values, meaning those on the left become much more aligned across both value dimensions and left-right self-placement. Alternatively, right-wing self-placement becomes even less related to economic values over time, meaning at the end of the period right-wing self-placements are significantly less coherent over both sets of values than for those on the left. This suggests both sides of the left-right spectrum contribute to the shifts observed over time, in differing ways.

Finally in chapter 2, I also explore the ways that changes in the relationship between values and left-right self-placement are related to individual-level issue importance, though the results in this area are mixed. This may be due to difficulties with the Most Important Issue question in the BES (Bartle and Laycock, 2012; Wlezien, 2005). I return to this theme in Chapter 4, where I use a survey experiment to draw out whether priming dimensional issue salience impacts the relationship between left-right self-placement and each dimension of values.

1.8.2 Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, I turn to more directly address the themes of realignment that appear in the results of chapter 2. In Chapter 2, I found that cultural values have become more important in people's perceptions of the left-right space. In Chapter 3 I aim to examine the role of the EU referendum in this process. Specifically, I ask whether the EU referendum was a cause of realignment, or a consequence of a process already in place. I focus on the voter bases of the Labour Party and Conservative Party pre-referendum, the divisions that are in place before the referendum, and the divisions which emerge in its wake. Again, I use measures of both operational and symbolic ideology to help answer this question.

In Chapter 3 I find that again the results of the analyses are asymmetric; while the Labour

vote base in 2015 already looks divided along the lines that will become the EU divide, there is more unity in the Conservative base across its cultural liberals and cultural conservatives under the leadership of David Cameron. After the referendum, as the Conservative party governs over the Brexit deal, cross-pressured Conservative Remainers appear to become aware of a growing gap between themselves and their party. Over time they view themselves as more centrist than before, and their party as more right-wing. The conclusion of this chapter is that the EU referendum looks more like it crystallised existing divisions within the Labour base, whilst in the Conservative party base it created new divides.

1.8.3 Chapter 4

In Chapter 4 I return to a question raised by Chapter 2; can the changing usage of the left-right scale by the public be explained by the changing salience of ideological dimensions? In this chapter I utilise an original, pre-registered survey experiment to assess how priming individuals to think about either the economic or cultural dimension of politics changes where people place themselves on the left-right scale. Does priming on economic issues in the left-right space cause voters to choose a self-placement more in line with their economic values? Does priming on cultural issues in the left-right space cause people to choose a self-placement more in line with their cultural values?

The results of the experiment in Chapter 4 demonstrate that priming on the linkages between left-right terminology and the cultural dimension has an impact on people's left-right self-placement. Compared to the control group, those primed to think about issues on the cultural dimension choose a self-placement more in line with their cultural values. Alternatively, priming people to think about issues on the economic dimension looks to have little impact on left-right self-placement, even among those who appear cross-pressured. This suggests that, even in an environment where cultural issues such as immigration and Brexit have been highly salient, there is still room for cultural issues to become more central to left-right self-placement. However, it seems there is little room for economic priming to strengthen the

relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement, perhaps because awareness of the economic content of the left-right division is already high. This asymmetry in the effectiveness of the dimensional priming again contributes to our understanding of a realignment in British politics where the major left-right divide seems increasingly likely to be redefined around disagreements on the cultural dimension.

1.8.4 Conclusion

In the conclusion, I reflect upon the findings of the three papers and their implications for measurements of left-right ideology and British politics. I draw on the similarities in findings across the three papers, such as the asymmetry across the left-right divide. I also suggest avenues for future research that this thesis does not address.

Chapter 2

Two Dimensions of Ideology and the Meaning of Left-Right

Abstract

Understanding how voters use the left-right scale is essential, as it is not only related to vote choice, but underpins how political scientists study ideology. This study finds that the way voters use the left-right scale is variable both between individuals and over time. Using British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) data from 2014-2024, I find that, while economic and cultural values are both related to left-right self-placement, this varies both between individuals and over time. I find that those on the left of the self-placement scale can best be differentiated from one another by the strength of left economic values. Cultural values are less predictive of their left-right self-placement. Alternatively, on the right side of the scale, cultural values are more useful in separating between different self-placement levels. Economic values fail to correlate with more extreme right self-placements. Over time, left-right self-placement has become increasingly related to cultural values instead of economic values, driven by movements by people on both sides of the left-right spectrum. These findings indicate that even within one country the meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’ is variable, both over time and between individuals.

2.1 Introduction

With the decline of partisanship in the UK (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2021; Särilvik and Crewe, 1983), ideology may play an increasingly central role in how citizens make sense

of politics. Spatial models of voting assume that individuals can locate themselves on a left–right scale in relation to parties (Aldrich and McKelvey, 1977; Downs, 1957), but this assumption raises a crucial question of how voters define this scale. Understanding how citizens interpret the left–right spectrum is vital, as self-placement not only guides vote choice but also underpins how researchers measure ideology and representation. While scholars increasingly view political competition as multi-dimensional (Bakker, Jolly and Polk, 2012; Kriesi et al., 2006), survey research often relies on the single left–right question to capture ideology and how citizens view politics. This paper examines how multiple dimensions of ideological thought shape the way individuals use the left–right scale, and what this implies for the meaning of left and right in contemporary British politics.

In an environment where dimensions of political conflict have weak correlation with one another (Kriesi et al., 2006), many individuals will have some positions that might be interpreted as ‘right-’ and some that would be interpreted as ‘left-wing’ (Gidron, 2022). Some of these individuals may solve this dilemma by considering themselves as centrists and others may see themselves as ‘right-wing’ or ‘left-wing’, despite holding some positions that contradict this (Treier and Hillygus, 2009). This article will explore how the salience of political dimensions help explain left-right self-placement in the UK, examining how the left-right scale is used differently over time and between individuals at different ends of the scale.

Understanding the latent ideological dimensions that underscore left-right self-placement can also help explain voter (re)alignment. In many countries voters have transitioned from being divided along class-based or income lines, towards divisions based on age or education level (Hooghe and Marks, 2026; Inglehart, 1990; Kriesi et al., 2006). If voters’ conception of left-right competition has switched from a focus on economic issues towards cultural issues, this helps explain the ideological component of the alignment between voters and parties.

Left-right self-placement may be expected to align in a familiar way with political attitudes, predominantly along economic divisions. This is increasingly unlikely in political systems characterised by multiple dimensions of values (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). Tra-

ditionally, the major cleavage in British politics has been a class-based divide contested along economic issues (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). However, increasingly a second dimension of cultural issues has risen in importance in the UK. This has been highlighted most prominently by the EU referendum (Cutts et al., 2020; Fieldhouse et al., 2019), which cross-cut traditional economic left-right ideology and aligned more closely with liberal-authoritarian attitudes. The traditional linkages between ‘left’ and ‘right’ identities and economic attitudes may be weakening further for those who think that the major political divide is based on an issue on the cultural dimension, such as immigration. This observation suggests that there will be variation in how the left-right scale is used, and therefore how political scientists should interpret responses to it.

This paper uses British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) data over a period of ten years (2014-2024) to investigate how linkages between political values and left-right self-placement vary, both over time and between individuals. I find that there is variation between how those at opposite ends of the left-right self-placement spectrum seem to be using the scale itself. Those placing themselves on the left of the scale are consistently on the economic left and their exact position on the left of the scale can be predicted well by *how* left-wing their economic values are. For the right, *how* right-wing they place themselves is predicted more strongly by their values on the cultural dimension. This is related to those issues each side of the political spectrum are more likely to name as important. Many issues more important to those identifying on the left are economic issues such as austerity and inequality. The issues that are more important to those identifying on the right include issues related with the cultural dimension such as immigration, crime and terrorism.

Much research notes the increased association of the left-right divide with cultural issues in Europe (Kriesi et al., 2006; Lachat, 2018; Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013). I also find that the power of economic values to predict left-right self-placement has declined in the UK over the period studied, and left-right self-placement is more closely correlated with cultural values by the 2024 General Election. This is driven by changes among those on both

sides of the left-right spectrum, albeit in different ways. Those identifying on the left became more likely to align their left-wing self-placement with equally culturally liberal values by the end of the period. Alternatively, the direction of travel for those identifying on the right is that they became less consistently economically right-wing. Over time, the right-wing half of the self-placement scale increasingly includes many who identify as right-wing while holding centre or even left economic values. This means that over the decade studied, the left has strengthened the relationship between cultural values and self-placement, and the right has weakened the relationship between economic values and self-placement. The result of this is that those on the left appear ideologically consistent across their self-placement, economic and cultural values by 2024. Those identifying on the right however often hold economic values that are inconsistent with their right-wing self-placement and culturally conservative values.

These findings demonstrate that there is a divide not only of issue positions, but also over which dimension of political conflict is most central to the left-right divide. The weakening link between left-right terminology and economic values provides support for the thesis that there has been some kind of ideological realignment within British politics, or perhaps a dealignment, at least for those on the right and economic values. Nevertheless, right-wing self-placements remain predictive of culturally conservative values.

These findings have implications for how we understand ideological self-placement as a representation of the public's political values. They also contribute to debates on issue importance and how parties appeal to different parts of the electorate. In the UK context, understanding how voters view political competition may help explain the emergence of Brexit-based party blocs during the 2024 General Election (Griffiths et al., 2026).

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I outline Ellis and Stimson's (2012) differentiation between 'symbolic' and 'operational' ideology to help illustrate the two measurements of ideology. I then explain how this is complicated by a context where political competition is increasingly multi-dimensional. Next, I explore why there might be differences between

how those on the left and right use the left-right self-placement scale, and how this might be explained by the difference in the issues important to each side of the political spectrum. Finally, I discuss the way ideological alignment might have changed over the last decade, and whether this too, is related to issue importance.

In the results section, I illustrate the difference in the usage of the left-right self-placement scale between those on the left and the right, and identify that this seems related to the issues each side sees as important. I then assess the power of economic and cultural values to predict left-right self-placement over time, and find that this is less closely related with reported issue importance.

In the conclusion I discuss the implications these findings have more widely. This includes the possibility of ideological realignment in the UK, asymmetry in coherence between the left and right, and the difficulty of using ‘most important issue’ measures to understand dimensional salience in British politics.

2.2 Ideology in a multi-dimensional political space

It is essential to assess the extent to which researchers’ usage of ideology measurements match the way that they are recognised and used by the public. That is, when individuals are asked to position their political identity on a left-right scale, is this an accurate reflection of their political values? Or, more precisely, do political scientists correctly interpret how this left-right self-placement scale is being used? One strand of political science argues that citizens are ideologically unaware and self-reported ideology is unlikely to adequately summarise political beliefs, if a coherent and stable set of political beliefs even exists (Converse, 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017). In contrast, others argue that left-right self-placement is an important and valuable measure of individual beliefs, evidenced by its ability, for example, to predict vote choice, and by the psychological differences between those identifying on the left and the right (Jost, 2006; 2021). Increasingly, though, it seems unlikely that a one-dimensional

left-right self-placement scale will be able to represent a political space that contains more than one dimension of political divisions (Feldman and Johnston, 2014; Treier and Hillygus, 2009). Further, in a multi-dimensional political system, the question is not just whether the left-right self-placement scale represents someone's political values but *which* dimension of values it represents. Increasingly, the usage of left and right terminology is likely to be more varied. As one dimension of politics becomes more important it may be more central to how one defines themselves in left-right terms.

To understand how citizens use the labels of left and right, I draw upon the definitions outlined by Ellis and Stimson (2012). They distinguish between two measures of ideology: 'symbolic' and 'operational' ideology. Symbolic ideology represents an individual's own conception of their ideology, or their ideological identity, and is generally measured by asking respondents to place themselves on an ideological scale. In the US, this is a scale spanning liberal to conservative, whilst elsewhere, including in the UK, the ends are defined as 'left' and 'right'. Operational ideology is normally measured by scales related to various political values, policy positions, or issue questions. We can compare how operational ideology (values, attitudes, issue preferences) relates to someone's symbolic ideology (how they place themselves on a left-right scale). In this paper, I refer to operational ideology as someone's political 'values' to align with the BES questions used to measure this.

There have been a number of US-based studies that consider how these two types of ideology relate to each other at the individual level. Ellis and Stimson (2012) find that, of those individuals who can place themselves on the liberal-conservative spectrum, barely half align this ideological identity with their responses to issue questions. Claassen, Tucker and Smith (2015) classify roughly half of their respondents as 'ideologically conflicted' when they ask voters to label their political positions ideologically. In the US, then, many individuals do not align ideological identity and issue positions. Explaining the mismatch between ideological self-placement and political attitudes has sometimes been put down to ideological incoherence. Converse (1964) argued that very few individuals should be considered to hold

ideologically coherent views. In his study he found that even those who report a political identity often fail to explain it or hold views that fit within standard definitions of it. More recent work in the US has defended Converse's theory. Kinder and Kalmoe (2017) argue that the ideological 'innocence' of the American electorate extends to the present. They point to the large proportion of individuals in public opinion surveys who decline to place themselves on the ideological spectrum. Ideological self-placement may not reflect operational ideology at all.

Nevertheless, it may be a mistake to interpret the differences between these two measures of ideology solely through a lens of ideological incoherence. The ideological innocence argument itself is not uncontested. Ideological self-placement may be significant due to its correlation with other psychological and personality traits, as well as its robust ability to predict behaviour such as voting (Jost, 2021). Mismatching self-placements and political values may not be simply a function of a lack of understanding, because individuals seem to know which issue positions *should* go with each end of the left-right ideological spectrum, even if they themselves fail to hold the 'correct' issue position based on their ideological self-placement (Groenendyk, Kimbrough and Pickup, 2022).

If people hold a symbolic ideology which is misaligned with their operational ideology this could emerge because they have a set of issue positions that fall across the political spectrum. It is less obvious how these individuals should think of themselves on an overall ideological scale. This highlights one of the main reasons why measuring ideology is increasingly complex. Whilst individuals continue to be asked to describe their ideology on a one-dimensional left-right (liberal-conservative) scale, their attitudes increasingly reflect positions on multiple dimensions of political conflict. When given the chance to pick ideological identities outside of just liberal or conservative, large proportions of the American public choose to do so (Trexler and Johnston, 2024). It may well be that how we measure ideological identity is not sufficiently expansive to explain attitudinal variation within the population. Still, given the widespread usage of the one-dimensional self-placement scale, it is likely to be

representative of at least some aspect of someone's political attitudes. However, it would be inaccurate to draw conclusions about the usage of the self-placement scale without considering multiple dimensions of operational ideology (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). This is even more necessary when analysis moves outside of the US, where multi-party systems are associated with multiple dimensions of electoral competition (Lijphart, 2012; Stoll, 2011).

Generally, political competition is increasingly seen as made up of at least two dimensions; an economic dimension alongside a social/cultural dimension (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002; Kriesi et al., 2006). These political dimensions represent the orthogonal political divisions over which voters diverge. When multiple political issues divide voters along the same lines, they comprise a single dimension. Yet if some issues divide the electorate in ways that are orthogonal to other issues, there is likely more than one dimension of political conflict. The definition of the economic dimension is fairly standardised. There has been more disagreement about the 'new' dimension of politics that has varied both in name and in content. It has variously been defined as a 'post-materialist' dimension (Inglehart, 1990), a divide between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation (Kriesi et al., 2006), GALTAN (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002), or simply as a 'cultural' or 'social' dimension. Definitions of the poles of these scales vary as frequently as the names, but typically comprise of one end that represents more culturally liberal views and one end that represents the culturally conservative. Notably, these poles are rarely named simply 'left' and 'right', unlike those on the economic dimension. This adds to the suggestion that they are not tied to the left-right divide. Yet, the issues contested on this dimension are important in how we think about a modern left-right political space. Culturally liberal positions are expected to align with left economic views, and culturally conservative positions are expected to align with those on the economic right.

Party systems in Western Europe generally tend to operate in this way, with parties combining left economics with cultural liberalism, or right-wing economics with cultural conservatism. However, in larger cross-national studies there is more often a negative correlation

between economic and cultural attitudes (Malka, Lelkes and Soto, 2019). This suggests that the alignment of economic and cultural dimensions is context dependent. Even in Western Europe and even when party systems align along economic and cultural dimensions, large proportions of the electorate increasingly fit into the economic-left and culturally-authoritarian quadrant (van der Brug and van Spanje, 2009). Understandably, voters may have more difficulty understanding where they fit on a one-dimensional left-right spectrum under these conditions.

In a political environment where voters are divided along more than one dimension, and where the language of left-right is still used by political elites, voters may have different understandings of what the *main* dimension of political conflict is and what it means to be left- or right-wing. One's placement on the left-right scale is dependent not just on which issue preferences they hold, but which they hold as more central to their political identity than others. For example, we could imagine someone with left-authoritarian values, who moves from identifying on the left to identifying on the right without changing their values at all - they would only have to change the importance they assign to each issue dimension.

2.2.1 The relationship between ideology and partisanship

While this paper focuses primarily on ideology, it is important to briefly address ideology's relationship to partisanship, particularly given the increasingly fragmented nature of the UK party system . The spatial voting framework assumes that individuals can be conceptualized as positioned *closer* or *further* from various parties within an ideological space, with parties strategically developing policies to attract voters by minimizing this ideological distance (Downs, 1957). This ideological space is commonly operationalized as a unidimensional scale running from 'left' to 'right' (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989).

One can imagine a scenario where partisanship and party loyalty is sufficiently strong and detached from ideology that perhaps understanding the determinants of ideological identity seems less relevant. However, in an alternative scenario where party loyalty has weakened,

and the number of parties increases, voters may be more reliant than ever on ideology as a heuristic to guide them in political behaviour such as voting.

The recent fragmentation of the UK party system suggests that understanding the underlying determinants of left-right self-placement is fundamental to understanding voting behaviour. Voting for the two largest parties reached a peak in 2019. However, by the 2024 General Election the Labour Party and Conservative Party combined gained only 57% of the vote. Voting for smaller parties increased significantly, with the Green Party and Reform UK gaining votes and seats. The ideological structure underlying this party competition highlights the need to understand how voters think about their own left-right identity. Disenchanted Conservative Party voters may have been attracted to a more right-wing alternative in Reform UK, while the Labour Party had to contend with competition from the Green Party on their left, and both parties competed with the Liberal Democrats in the centre (Griffiths et al., 2026).

Ideological competition matters, even within parties. Voters are able to judge that Labour led by Jeremy Corbyn was more left-wing than that led by Keir Starmer (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2019; Somer-Topcu, Tavits and Baumann, 2020). Equally, competition from challenger parties may be heightened under an environment when economic issues are weaker determinants of the overall left-right space. As challengers, Reform UK and the Green Party are able to present ‘blurrier’ positions on economic policies (Koedam, 2021). In an environment where voters view cultural issues as the most important dimension of political competition, this is less likely to be an electoral disadvantage (De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013; Rovny and Polk, 2020).

2.2.2 Cleavage politics

Theories of political cleavages would focus on alignments between social groups and parties, with this population divide accompanied by an ideological dimension of disagreement. Traditional conceptions of the UK defined it as a class-divided society voting along the lines of

economic attitudes (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Yet this class-party alignment likely reached its height in the late 1950s or early 1960s, and has been declining since (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Scarbrough, 1987). There is much debate over whether a new population-level cleavage has emerged in recent years. One of these possibilities is education, as an increasingly educated population creates the grounds for a divide based upon education (Hooghe and Marks, 2026). Another possible divide would be over age due to an ageing population. Finally, it is possible that place-based cleavages could have emerged, with divisions between urban and rural voters. However, the focus on this paper is not on group alignments and cleavages, but instead the ideological divisions that accompany these alignments between segments of the population and their parties. Thus the interest here is not which particular cleavage is forming in the UK, but which ideological division it accompanies. Importantly, each of these possible cleavages is more closely linked with ideological disagreement on a cultural, rather than economic dimension (Jennings and Stoker, 2016; Stubager, 2008; Tilley, 2005).

2.3 Variation in the usage of the left-right scale

In a multi-dimensional ideological space, the content of the latent ideology underlying left-right labels may vary both over time and between individuals. The ‘new’ politics dimension has become more important since at least the 1990s. In party systems where economic and cultural positions are correlated there is little reason to expect that changes in the salience of the ‘new politics’ dimension would necessarily reduce the importance of the economic dimension. The cultural dimension could predict symbolic left-right positions alongside the economic dimension. However, in the UK these two dimensions have historically been weakly correlated at the voter level (Bartle, 2000; Evans, Heath and Lalljee, 1996). This leaves open the possibility for variation in the usage of ‘left’ and ‘right’ labels, dependent on which political dimension is most important or salient (De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013; Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann, 2014). This may change either over time or vary between

individuals.

The idea that the left-right space increasingly represented conflicts outside of the economic dimension dates back to Inglehart's theory of post-materialism (Inglehart, 1990). This suggested reduced concerns about economic or security issues lead to a decline in class-based conflict. Scaling data from 1984, Inglehart argued that the latent ideological space was defined both by economic issues and 'post-material' issues such as environmental concerns. However, the economic dimension better predicted left-right self-placement than the new politics dimension at both the elite and mass level (Inglehart, 1990). By the 1980s non-economic issues had become more prominent in the latent ideological space, but not yet in a way which reduced the ability of the economic dimension to predict symbolic ideology. More recent evidence from Europe however suggests that economic values have reduced in importance as cultural values have continued to become more prominent, in both the electoral agenda of parties (Kriesi et al., 2006) and at the individual level in predicting left-right self-placement (De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013)

The weakened relationship between economic values and self-placement has been driven by some sections of the population more than others. For example in the US, those identifying as conservative were less likely to align this self-placement with their economic attitudes than those identifying as liberal (Ellis and Stimson, 2012). Equally, those who hold both left-economic views and socially authoritarian views have been more likely to identify on the right (Gidron, 2022). Evidence from Western Europe finds that economic preferences are more strongly related to self-placement on the left of the scale, while sociocultural attitudes have the equivalent relationship with the right (Lachat, 2018). This suggests that right-wing economic views may no longer be an essential component of a right-wing self-placement. The extremity of right-wing self-placement may be more correlated with cultural values, whilst the extremity of left-wing self-placement may be more correlated with economic values. This leads to my first hypothesis:

H1a: Self-placement correlates more with economic values on the left and cultural

values on the right

This paper will also explore *why* the left-right scale is representative of different issues between individuals through an exploration of what voters name as the most important issue to them. If parties are able to increase the salience of issues with their own supporters (Seeberg and Adams, 2025), they may be able to reinforce the idea that certain issues are more important. For example, radical right parties may increase the salience of immigration and green parties may increase the salience of the environment. Parties may particularly strengthen this within the subsections of voters already sympathetic to that party. There are cultural issues that are important to different sections of the liberal-authoritarian spectrum. The environment and LGBT rights are more important to liberal voters, and immigration and crime are more important for the more culturally conservative section of the electorate. However, if there are more on the right whose most important political issue is a cultural issue than on the left, this may explain the asymmetry between the left and the right.

In the UK, parties on the left and right have sent different signals about issue importance. For example, in the 2019 General Election, the Conservative Party's focus was to "Get Brexit Done". The Labour Party had a broader focus across issues, such as reducing inequality and increasing healthcare spending (Allen and Barra, 2021). It seems likely that voters on the left and the right in the UK have different issue priorities, and this may help explain the differential relationship between operational ideology and left-right self-placement between left- and right-wing identifiers. This leads to the following hypothesis that will be tested using the question on what voters name as their most important issue:

H1b: The asymmetric relationship between attitudes and self-placement is associated with differential issue importance, with left-identifiers prioritizing economic issues and right-identifiers prioritizing cultural issues.

2.3.1 Changes over time in the UK

Traditionally, the major divide between those on the left and the right in British politics has been an economic cleavage, aligning closely with social class (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Lipset, 1967). At the party level, the UK has been judged to have lower dimensional complexity than other European countries (Bakker, Jolly and Polk, 2012). This is likely due to the UK's historically strong two-party system, where new issues are most likely folded into the competition between the Conservative and Labour parties (Bartle, King and Webb, 2024; Carmines and Stimson, 1986). Cultural and economic values may be expected to more easily reduce onto a singular left-right dimension. However, this does not necessarily guarantee a singular dimension of ideology at the individual level - in fact, the voting patterns in the UK's referendum on the EU in 2016 indicated that we should not expect this to be the case. The EU referendum created many voters who were cross-pressured between the party loyalties and Brexit position among Labour/Leavers and Conservative/Remainers.

When economic and cultural value questions were introduced into the British Election Study in 1992, it was noted that economic values were much more closely aligned with voting patterns than cultural values (Heath, Evans and Martin, 1994). There has been much discussion about the decline of class-based voting in the UK since the Labour party's move to the economic centre in the 1990s (Cutts et al., 2020; Evans, 1999). Nevertheless, economic values continued to be much more predictive of vote choice between the two parties than any other dimension of political values, up to and including the 2015 General Election (Fieldhouse et al., 2019).

The referendum on the EU marked a clear turning point wherein the dominant issue in UK politics divided the electorate almost entirely by their views on the cultural dimension, and not at all by economic values. This was not a one-off affecting only the EU referendum as by the 2017 General Election, cultural values were almost as predictive of vote choice between the two main parties as economic values (Fieldhouse et al., 2019). This increased in the 2019 General Election two years later, which has largely been viewed as an election on Brexit

itself (Johns, 2021). Whilst individuals are asked to place themselves on the same left-right scale they always have, people may be interpreting what it means to be left or right in ways different to the past. Given the growing importance of a major issue - Brexit - that divided the country along cultural rather than economic values, it seems likely that cultural values may have become more predictive of left-right self-placement than economic values. There was a decline in the salience of the debate over Brexit after the UK left the EU. In the years before the 2024 election, economic issues (predominantly the cost of living crisis) returned to prominence. The turbulence of recent UK politics provides a rich environment wherein it is possible to evaluate both whether the dominance of an effectively cultural issue on UK politics (Brexit) changed the public's understanding of the left-right space, and whether this has remained the case when economic concerns once again became important.

Given the increased prominence of cultural values in the left-right space in Europe (De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013), and the prominence of Brexit as a major issue in the UK, I will test whether cultural values have become more important to the left-right self-placement over time, and whether this has coincided with a decrease in the importance of economic values. The two hypotheses laid out below are presented separately, and are not competing. If cultural values and economic values are not highly correlated with one another, their relationship with left-right self placement may have different trajectories. Its possible for economic values to decrease in correlation with left-right self-placement without a simultaneous increase in the correlation between cultural values and left-right self-placement, or *visa versa*.

H2a: Cultural values have become a stronger predictor of left-right self-placement over time

H2b: Economic values have become a weaker predictor of self-placement over time

I will also test whether this coincides with changes in responses to the "Most Important Issue" question. If left-right self-placement is increasingly related to cultural, rather than

economic values, is this due to the increasing salience of issues on the cultural dimension? Cultural issues - specifically, the UK's exit from the EU - dominated British Politics between the EU referendum and the 2019 General Election. However, as the cost of living, an economic issue, became dominant in British politics from 2022, did this coincide with an increase in the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement? These changes in the most important issues for the British electorate allow an analysis of whether the salience of issues helps explain the relationship between values and left-right self-placement.

H2c: These changes in the relationship between values and left-right self-placement over time are correlated with changes in the dominant most important issue dimension

2.4 Data

This study uses data from the British Election Study Internet Panel, from 2014-2024 (Fieldhouse et al., 2024). The British Election Study Internet Panel is a representative sample of voters in England, Scotland and Wales, collected online by YouGov. There are around 30,000 respondents in each wave of data. Due to the panel format, respondents can drop in and out of the data depending on which waves they respond to the survey in. Each wave of the study is designed to be cross-sectionally representative, so new respondents are brought in to replace those who have dropped out.

In this study, I include data from the 14 waves that asked all respondents questions on both left-right self-placement and the ten operational ideology questions between 2014 and 2024. When I refer to data pooled across 'all waves' in the present chapter, I refer to these 14 waves, as opposed to all possible 29 waves in the BESIP dataset over this period. After removing respondents who have not placed themselves on the left-right self-placement scale or had not answered at least four of each of the value batteries, there were a total of 86,872 individuals in the data. Respondents were included in any of the waves they have provided

responses. This means that over the 14 waves there were a total of 299,412 observations.

2.4.1 Ideological Self-Placement

The dependent variable in the models is ideological self-placement, where people place themselves on an 11-point left-right scale. On this scale, ‘0’ represents the most left-wing self-placement, and ‘10’ represents the most right-wing. The distribution of these responses are displayed in Figure 2.1 below. As can be seen, there is a high proportion of respondents who place themselves at the centre of the scale.

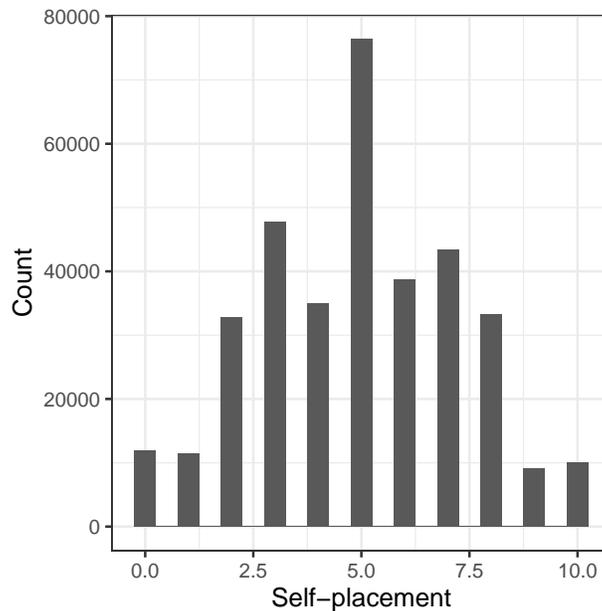


Figure 2.1: Distribution of self-placement responses

Note: Data pooled across all waves of data, 2014-2024.

2.4.2 Political Values

To measure political values (the ‘operational’ measure of ideology) I created one measure of economic values and one measure of cultural values. These are created using the 10 British Election Study ‘values’ questions. The five ‘left-right’ questions are scaled to create the economic measure, and the five authoritarian-libertarian questions are scaled together to

create a cultural measure. These questions were measured by agreement or disagreement with ideological statements, on a five-point Likert scale. These statements reflect general values and outlooks, such as "Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off" and "Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values" rather than specific policy questions, so as to be comparable over time. The full list of questions is provided in the appendix. These are the same questions that have historically been used to capture these two dimensions of political values in the UK (Evans, Heath and Lalljee, 1996), and are the questions that are used in the British Social Attitudes survey to capture ideology. A similar set of questions is used to capture ideology in the cross-sectional version of the British Election Study collected during each General Election.

I use Poole's Blackbox scaling methodology (Poole, 1998; Poole et al., 2016) to get measures of latent ideology from these value questions. This method generalises Aldrich-McKelvey scaling (Aldrich and McKelvey, 1977) in order to incorporate responses with missing data and to capture multiple latent dimensions of ordinal data. This approach estimates continuous scores that reproduce the ordinal data matrix directly, rather than deriving variance via a correlation or covariance matrix as with other scaling techniques such as factor analysis. I require respondents to have answered at least four of the five relevant questions in order for an attitudinal score to be created for them. The weights created for each question through this scaling methodology are outlined in the appendix.

The distributions of the two value measures are shown in Figure 2.2 below. A '0' score on each scale represents the median response, and 'left/liberal' responses are scored negatively. A movement from selecting all the most left/liberal response options to answering all the most right/conservative response options would be a movement of magnitude '1' in both scales, which means the magnitude of coefficients in the models are comparable. Economic values skew to the left, whilst cultural values skew in a conservative direction, as is frequently found in studies of the UK (e.g. Evans and Tilley 2017; Fieldhouse et al. 2023)

There is a discussion of using principal components analysis as an alternative scaling

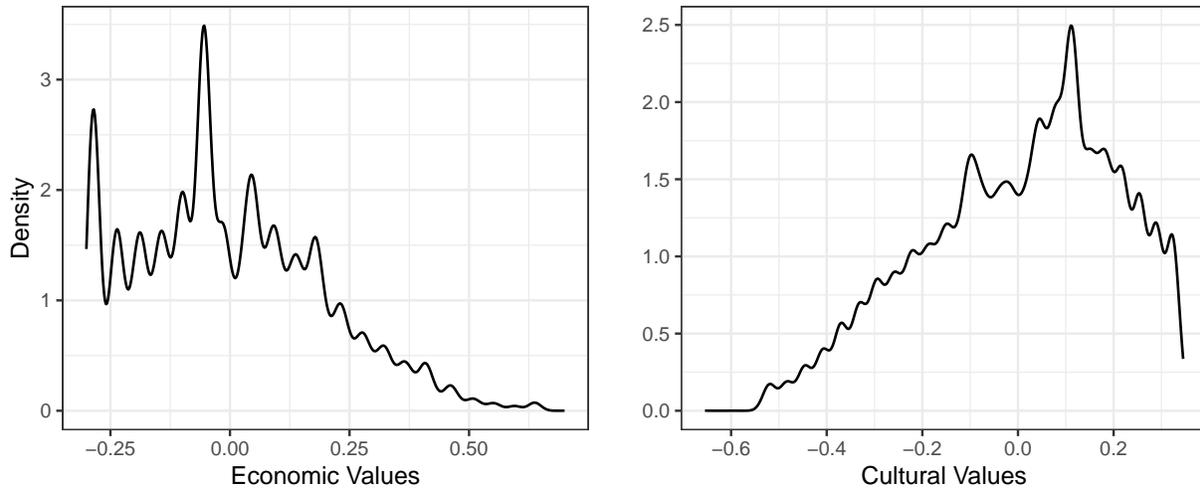


Figure 2.2: Density plots of economic and cultural values

These data are pooled from across all waves of data, 2014-2024. A score of ‘0’ marks the mean response in each value dimension. The distance from 0 therefore represents the deviation of the respondent from the mean. The average response skews to the left of the mid-point of the original question scales on economics, and to the authoritarian side of the mid-point on the liberal-authoritarian scales. This means that a score of ‘0’ is the mean response but not the centre of the range of possible scores.

technique for operational ideology scores in the appendix.

2.4.3 Most Important Issue

This paper also uses data on respondents’ reported most important issues (MII). In the BESIP, this data is collected as open-text responses. These have been coded by the BESIP team into categories, such as ‘inflation’, ‘europe’ or ‘immigration’. Each of these categories are then sorted into broader categories, which align with conceptions of political dimensions - economic, cultural and other.

To test H1b I pool this most important issue question across time, and am interested in whether each individual is more likely to report an economic or cultural issue as most important. Therefore in testing H1B I use an individual’s *modal* most important issue dimension - whether they are most often reporting an economic or cultural issue as most important, across all waves of data.

When testing H2c I am more interested in how the most frequently cited most important issue across all individuals changes over time. Therefore I assess the most frequently cited important issue at each time point.

2.5 Results

I will first provide an overview of the spatial relationship between ideological self-placement and values. Figure 2.3 shows the mean operational ideology position for individuals at each point on the self-placement scale, based on data pooled across all years. This broadly displays the expected pattern - those identifying on the left are more economically and culturally liberal than those identifying on the right. However, this plot also indicates that for some levels of the self-placement spectrum, attitudes might not quite be what we expect. For example, those who place themselves at '10' - the most extreme right self-placement - are on average less economically conservative than the average position of those identifying between 7 and 9. Additionally, those placing themselves at the centre of the scale are in the centre of the left and the right on economic attitudes, but look much more like the right in terms of their cultural values. This variation between individuals is explored further shortly.

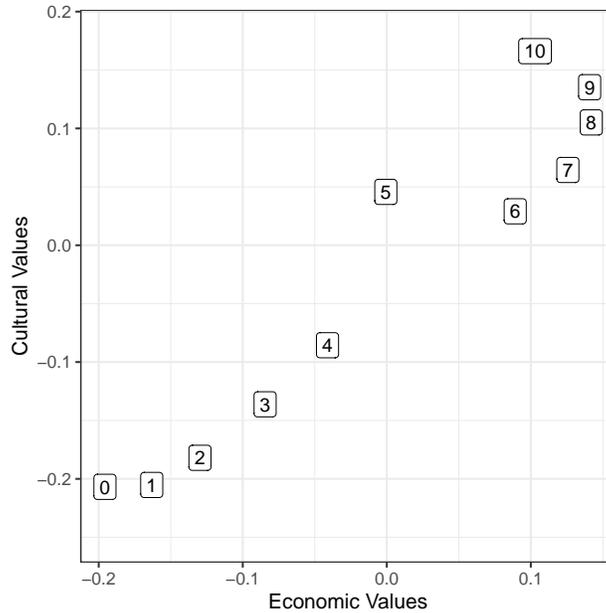


Figure 2.3: Mean attitudinal position of each self-placement level

The plotted numbers represent each self-placement level, while their position represents the mean economic and cultural values of someone at this self-placement level. This plot is constructed from data pooled across all waves from 2014-2024.

Before looking at variation between individuals, it is important to understand the overall average ability of values to predict self-placement across all the time points and individuals studied. Table 2.1 presents the results of models testing this. These first models include only operational ideology and symbolic ideology without controls, to include the maximum number of observations as non-response on control variables cuts the sample significantly. The first pooled model has clustered errors by individual, whilst the fixed effects model explores how shifts in values within individuals over time are correlated with changes in self-placement.

The pooled model shows that across the period studied, on average economic and cultural values are both powerful predictors of self-placement. The size of the coefficients are very similar (5.12 for economic values, and 5.06 for cultural values). This suggests that between 2014-2024 economic and cultural values are equally important to understand how someone places themselves on the left-right scale. The effect sizes around 5 indicate that moving from the most economically/culturally left-wing to the most right-wing latent ideological position

Table 2.1: Impact of economic and cultural values on ideological self-placement

Note: Self-placement is on the scale 0-10 while the values scales have a range of 1. This means that both the coefficients for economic and cultural values suggest moving from the most left/liberal responses to the most right/conservative responses to the values questions would predict a movement of almost half the self-placement scale in the pooled model.

	Pooled	Fixed-Effects
(Intercept)	5.01*** (0.01)	
Economic values	5.12*** (0.03)	1.00*** (0.03)
Cultural values	5.06*** (0.03)	0.80*** (0.04)
Num. obs.	321238	321238
R ² (full model)	0.44	0.88
R ² (proj model)		0.01
Adj. R ² (full model)	0.44	0.84
Adj. R ² (proj model)		0.01
Num. groups: id		89958
Num. groups: wave		14

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

is predicted to move someone 5 points (almost half-way) along the 11-point ideological self-placement scale.

The relationship between values and self-placements holds for the fixed-effects model also - as someone's economic and cultural values shift over time, their self-placement moves in the same direction. In the fixed-effects model, the magnitude of the coefficient for economic values is slightly larger, indicating that over time for one individual, their economic values are more related to shifts in self-placement than shifts in cultural values.

Do the correlations between values and left-right self-placement hold once additional controls are added to the model? Table 2.2 confirms that they do. Models 1 and 3 in Table 2.2 add in controls for demographic factors and political attention, while Models 2 and 4 additionally include a control for Party ID, with supporters of the Conservative Party as the reference group. Once controls for demographics and Party ID are included (in models 1 and 3), the correlation between values and left-right self-placement remains largely consistent, though economic values look to be a little more predictive of left-right self-placement than

cultural values. The additional introduction of Party ID reduces the coefficients of political values, as would be expected given the high correlation between political values and Party ID. However, even when including Party ID in the model, values continue to predict left-right self-placement in both the pooled and fixed-effects models. Once Party ID is included, cultural values become slightly more predictive than left-right self-placement in the pooled model, while the reverse is true in the fixed effects model.

Table 2.2: Impact of economic and cultural values on ideological self-placement, including controls

Note: The dependent variable is left-right self-placement, on a scale of 0-10. Values are scaled to have a range of 1. Conservative IDers are the reference group for Party ID, thus all the Party ID coefficients are in comparison with a Conservative Party ID.

	Pooled		Fixed-Effects	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
(Intercept)	4.15*** (0.02)	5.82*** (0.02)		
Economic values	5.04*** (0.02)	2.69*** (0.02)	0.86*** (0.02)	0.72*** (0.03)
Cultural values	4.84*** (0.02)	3.15*** (0.02)	0.71*** (0.03)	0.58*** (0.03)
Age	0.01*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Gender: Male	0.30*** (0.01)	0.19*** (0.01)		
Political Attention	0.05*** (0.00)	0.04*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Ethnicity: Ethnic Minority	-0.01 (0.02)	0.23*** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.05)
Education: Has Degree	-0.13*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.03* (0.02)
Party ID: Brexit / Reform UK		-0.02 (0.02)		-0.11*** (0.02)
Party ID: Change UK		-1.37*** (0.11)		-0.70*** (0.09)
Party ID: Green Party		-2.33*** (0.02)		-0.77*** (0.02)
Party ID: Labour		-2.49*** (0.01)		-0.92*** (0.02)
Party ID: Liberal Democrat		-1.49*** (0.01)		-0.64*** (0.02)
Party ID: Other		-1.59*** (0.03)		-0.56*** (0.03)
Party ID: Plaid Cymru		-2.09*** (0.04)		-0.76*** (0.06)
Party ID: SNP		-2.17*** (0.02)		-0.81*** (0.03)
Party ID: UKIP		0.04 (0.02)		-0.22*** (0.02)
Num. obs.	248693	225287	221728	199172
R ² (full model)	0.46	0.61	0.88	0.89
R ² (proj model)			0.01	0.03
Adj. R ² (full model)	0.46	0.61	0.85	0.86
Adj. R ² (proj model)			0.01	0.03
Num. groups: id			49722	45933
Num. groups: wave			12	12

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

2.5.1 Asymmetry in the usage of the left-right scale

While both economic and cultural values predict self-placement as a whole, there may be variance in how self-placement is related to values across the left-right placement scale itself.

The ridgeline plots in Figure 2.4 show the densities and means of attitudes at each self-placement level. A self-placement of 0 is the most left-wing, and a self-placement of 10 is the most right-wing. Both economic and cultural values tend to become more right-wing (visually shifting to the right of the plots) as self-placements become more right-wing, as would be expected. However, two kinds of asymmetries between the left and right halves of the self-placement scale are clear.

Assessing the densities displayed on the plot, there is a clear asymmetry between variance in values. That is, those identifying on the left have economic values that are a lot more similar to others at the same self-placement level than those identifying on the right - particularly the furthest to the right. Those identifying furthest to the right have a varied set of economic values all the way across the left-right spectrum. Almost the opposite is true when turning to the plot of cultural values. Here, those identifying on the right are consistently culturally conservative, whilst those identifying on the left have a broader range of cultural values.

A second asymmetry between those on the left and the right is evident when looking at the mean value score of each self-placement group. For those on the left, economic values seem to be the better way of differentiating between each self-placement level. Each further left self-placement group holds more economically left-wing values. This pattern mostly holds on cultural too, although the two most left self-placements (at the bottom of the right figure) are equally culturally liberal on average. Turning to those who place themselves on the right, cultural values better differentiate how far to the right each individual places themselves, with the most right-wing identifiers indeed being the most culturally conservative. However economic values are of little help in differentiating between those identifying on the right. A significant proportion of those identifying furthest to the right actually hold centre or

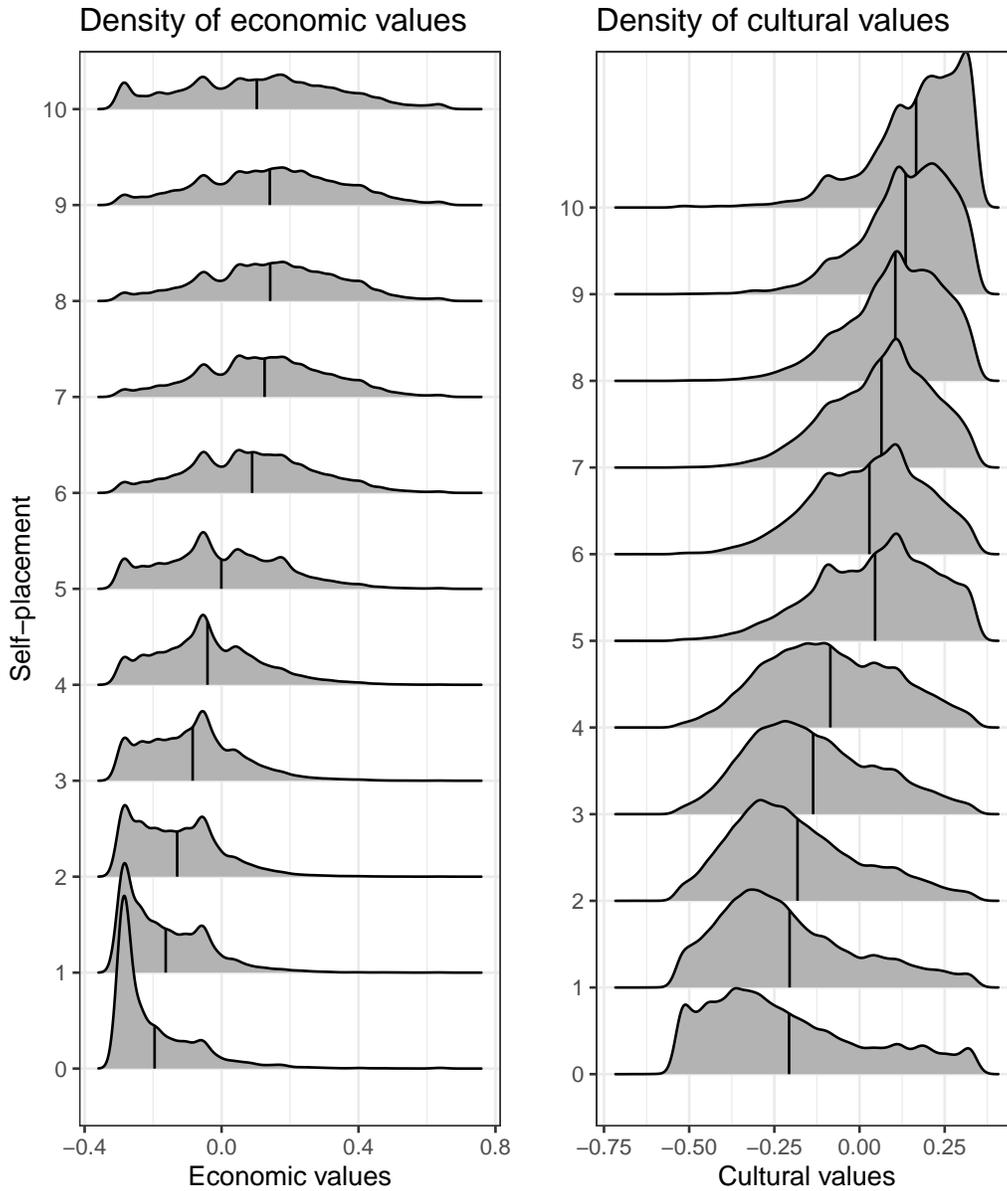


Figure 2.4: Ridgeline plots of densities of values for each self-placement level.

Note: The vertical axis here represents each self-placement level (0 is left, and 10 is right). Densities of values for each self-placement level are displayed on the y-axis. The black vertical lines indicate the mean value score for each self-placement level.

even left-wing economic values. On average, those identifying as ‘10’ are less economically right-wing than those identifying between 7-9. Between the left and the right, it seems that those identifying on the left are more able to align multiple dimensions of values with their ideological self-placement. This aligns with previous findings that there is less agreement on ideological norms on the right of British politics (Pickup, Kimbrough and de Rooij, 2022).

A final detail evidenced by Figure 2.4 is the spatial positioning of those identifying in the centre. This group holds a diverse set of attitudes on both economic and cultural dimensions, as would be expected. However, on average, this group looks a little more like those on the left side of the scale on economic values, and much more like those on the right side of the scale on cultural values. Thus, for many identifying in the centre, their central self-placement may be reflective of cross-pressure between the two dimensions.

Looking at the variance in attitudes between the left and right, there is evidence for H1a; that economic values are more central to left-wing self-placement, and cultural values are more central to right-wing self-placement.

2.5.2 Does issue importance explain the difference between the left and right?

What explains this asymmetry in how well each dimension predicts different sections of the left-right scale? One explanation is that the left are more concerned with economic issues, while the right are more concerned with cultural issues. In Figure 2.5 I assess the kind of issues that respondents name as most important to them, and how this is related to the left-right self-placement. In Figure 2.5 the most important issues raised are sorted by the average self-placement score of those who called them the most important issue. These are then colour-coded by whether the issue is an economic or cultural issue (as coded by the BES team).

What is clear from Figure 2.5 is that the majority of issues more likely to be named as important by those identifying on the left, such as austerity, poverty, and taxation, are

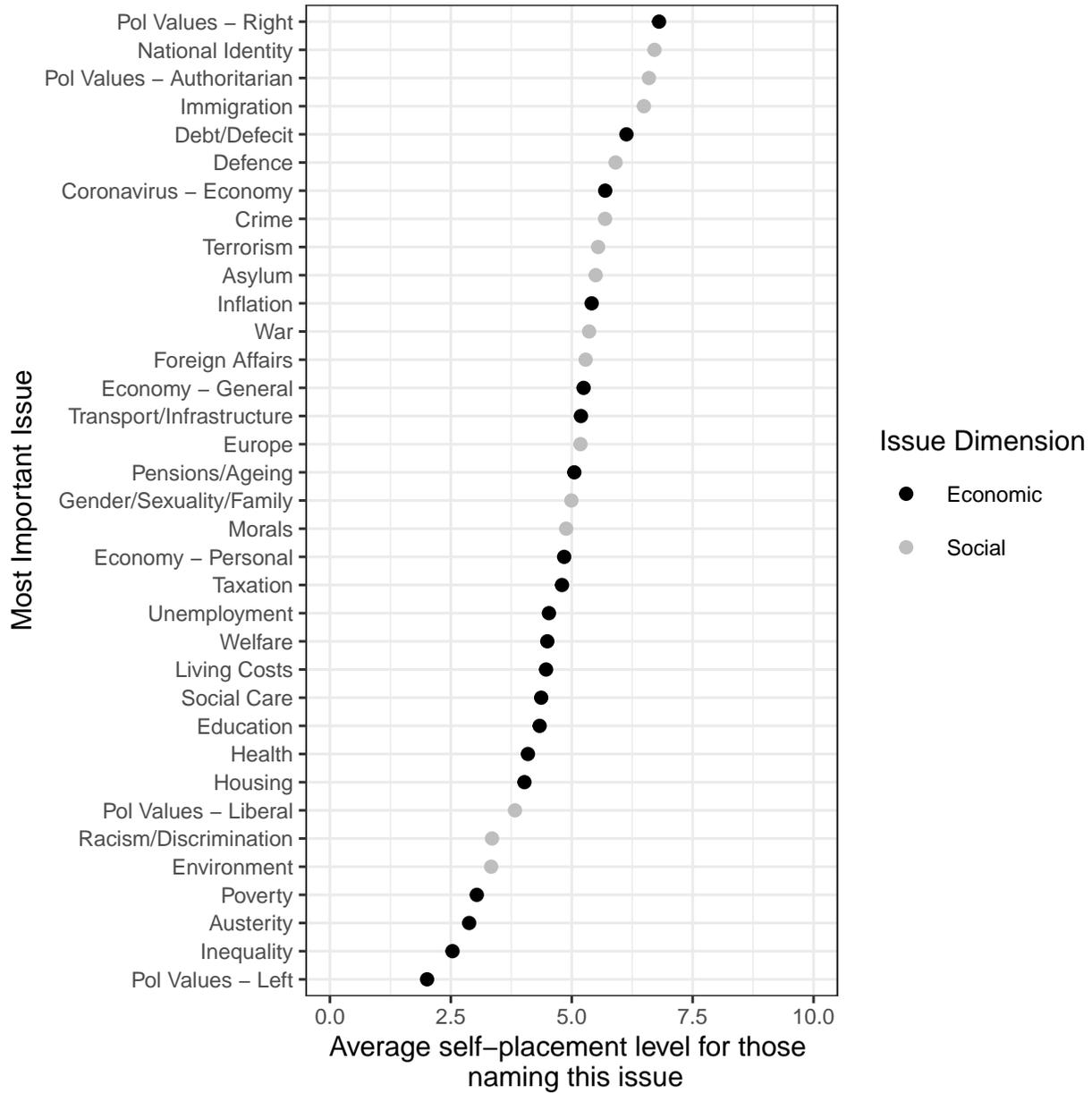


Figure 2.5: Mean self-placement of those naming each issue

Note: This chart shows the average self-placement level for responses to the question "As far as you're concerned, what is the SINGLE MOST important issue facing the country at the present time?", sorted by mean self-placement level. Included issues are limited to those coded by the BES team as either economic or social issues. Data is pooled across all waves between 2014-2024.

economic issues. Only a few issues on the cultural dimension are raised more often by those who identify on the left, such as the environment and racism/discrimination. The majority of issues on the cultural dimension, such as immigration, crime, and terrorism, are more often named as the most important issue by those identifying on the right of the political spectrum. Therefore it may be that when individuals are asked to place themselves on the left-right spectrum, those inclined to identify on the right may pay more attention to cultural issues, whilst those inclined to identify on the left are more likely thinking about representing their economic values. This could help explain some of the cases where values and self-placement are misaligned. It may be that someone who identifies further on the right expresses dissatisfaction with economic inequality when asked about it. However, if this is much less important to them than their culturally conservative views, it may be that their left-wing economic tendencies factor less into their own conception of how ‘left’ or ‘right’ they are.

In order to directly model the relationship between someone’s attitudes, self-placement and most important issue, I first divide the sample by their most frequently cited important issue across the waves of data. This is because most important issue is often dominated by the issue of the day - for example almost all of the sample named “Brexit” before the 2019 election, and almost of all the sample named “Coronavirus” in 2020. However, I divide the sample into those who are more generally concerned with economic issues, and those who are more usually concerned with cultural issues. Respondents are coded into those whose modal most important issue is economic, and those whose modal most important issue is cultural. I then use this as an interaction term between each of economic and cultural values as predictors of left-right self-placement.

Figure 2.6 shows the results of these interaction models. Those whose modal most important issue is on the economic dimension have a stronger link between economic values and self-placement than those whose modal most important issue is on the cultural dimension. However, as expected, this is reversed on cultural values. There is a stronger correlation

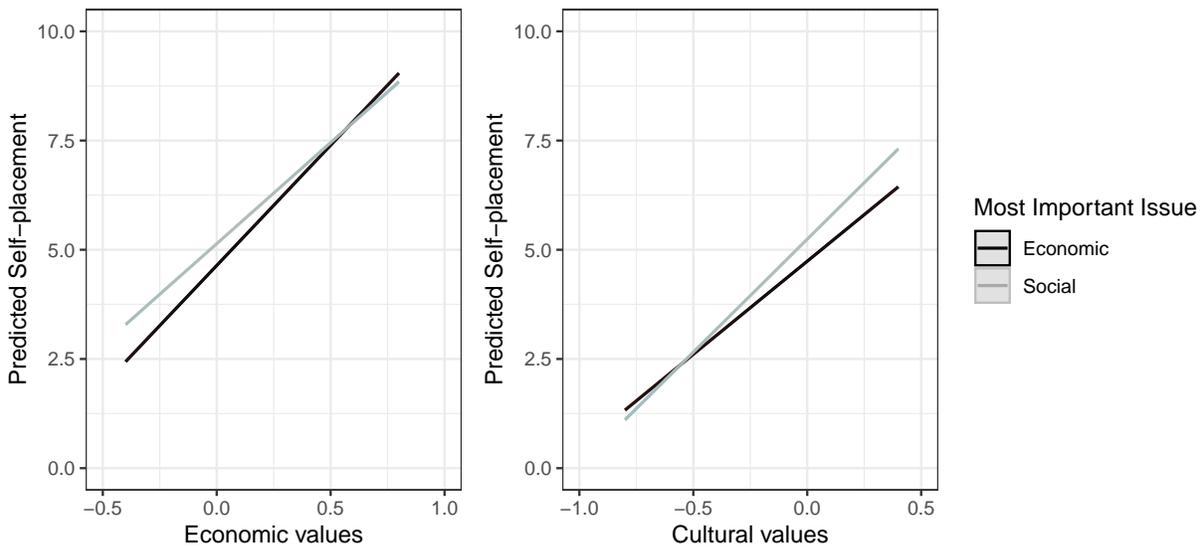


Figure 2.6: Interaction model of dimensional MII, self-placement and attitudes

Note: Relationship between modal most important issue, values, and self-placement. This is from a model predicting self-placement through interacting values on each dimension with someone's modal most important issue. Data is pooled across all waves, 2014-2024.

between cultural values and self-placement for those whose modal most important issue is on the cultural dimension.

These results suggest that the self-placement scale appears to be used to represent different dimensions of values for those on the right and those on the left. Self-placement on the left of the scale is associated with left economic values, and the extremity of left identification is closely aligned with *how* left these economic values are. Alternatively, the strength of right-wing self-placement is better correlated with the strength of cultural conservatism, and right-wing economic values do not seem to be central to a right-wing identification.

The evidence here supports H1b. The differences in the issues that are important to respondents on each side of the self-placement scale helps explain some of the asymmetry of the usage of the left-right scale. Economic issues are more likely seen as most important by those on the left, whilst cultural issues are more likely given as important by those on the right. This can help explain why economic values are more central to self-placement for the

left half of the scale, and cultural values are more central to self-placement for the right half of the scale.

2.5.3 Variation in determinants of self-placement over time

Whilst economic and cultural values are equally predictive of self-placement over the full time period, I expect that there have been shifts over time. Whilst some cultural issues were salient before the beginning of the BES panel (2014), there are still likely to be changes post-2014 given the dominance of the debate over the UK's relationship with the EU during this period. Given the salience of Brexit during this period, I expect that cultural values became more predictive of self-placement over time (H2a). I also expect this to come at the expense of the importance of economic values, with economic values becoming less predictive of self-placement over time (H2b).

Figure 2.7 shows a series of models, one for each wave of the data. This shows the coefficients of a model where values are predictors of left-right self-placement at each time point. The waves of data collected during General Elections are highlighted. The first notable pattern is that economic values become a weaker predictor of left-right self-placement across the whole period. For each subsequent General Election period, economic values are less predictive of left-right self-placement than before. There is a jump in the ability of cultural values to predict self-placement between the 2017 and 2019 General Elections. Whilst the 2017 General Election was after the EU referendum, it was really the 2019 General Election that was seen as an election *about* Brexit (Johns, 2021). However, cultural values remained equally predictive of left-right self-placement in 2024, a General Election context where cost of living concerns dominated over any issues on the cultural dimension.

The combination of the decline in the ability of economic values to predict self-placement, and the increase in cultural values, demonstrates a change in the extent to which each dimension of political conflict predicts left-right self-placement. In 2015 and 2017, economic values remained better predictors of the left-right space. By 2019, the two dimensions were

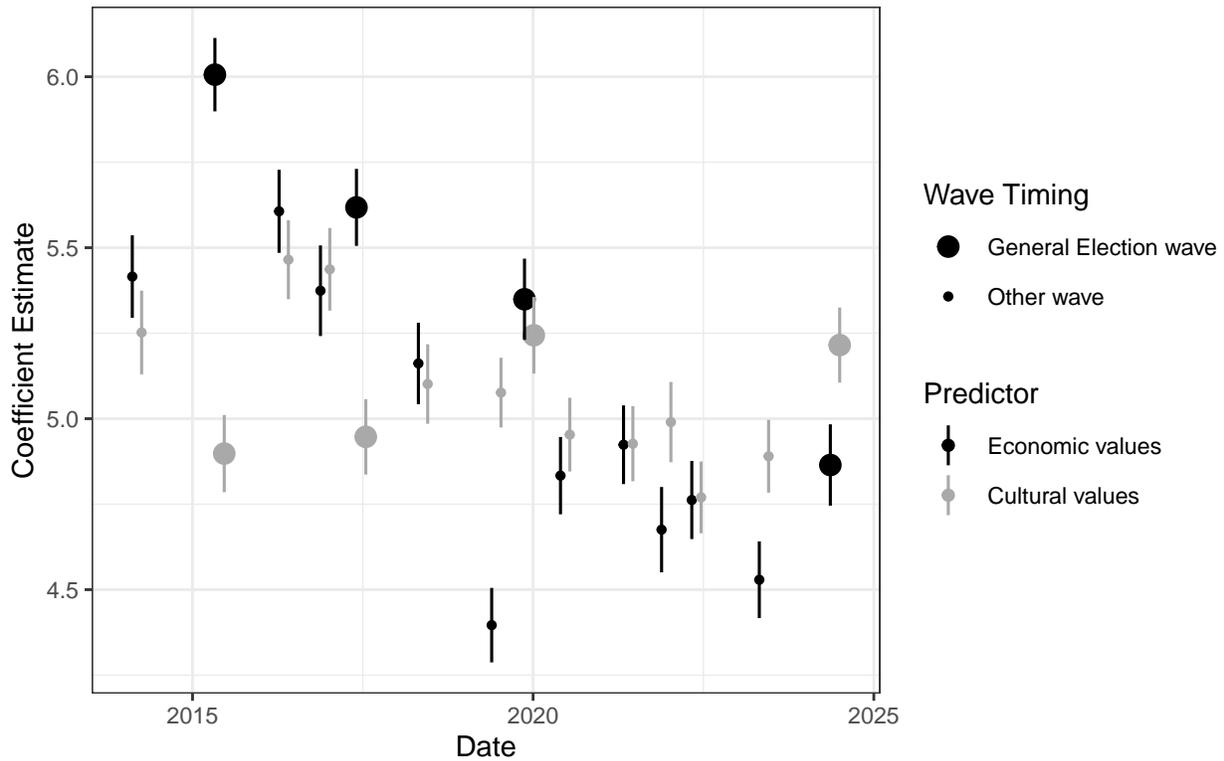


Figure 2.7: Regression models for attitudes predicting self-placement over time

Note: Coefficients from models for each wave of the data, predicting the impact of economic and cultural values on left-right self-placement. Waves where data collection took place during or shortly after a General Election campaign are represented by a larger circle.

equally predictive. By 2024, cultural values were more predictive of left-right self-placement. The results for the 2024 election are particularly striking. Even under the context of an election where concerns about the economy were most salient, cultural values were stronger predictors of left-right self-placement. Overall it seems there has been a longer term shift underway in British politics, where the the left-right divide now seems more representative of divides along cultural issues. The evidence here supports both H2a and H2b, though the decline of economic values is more prominent than the increase in the ability of cultural values to predict self-placement.

As discussed earlier, the meaning of the left-right space seems to vary depending on which side of the divide someone sits on. We can assess if the overall decline in the importance of

the economic dimension, and rise of the cultural dimension is being driven by people across the left-right spectrum.

Figure 2.8 shows how each self-placement level moves within the two-dimensional value space over time. Each number represents the mean value position of those identifying there on the left-right self-placement scale during the 2015 General Election. The arrow points towards the eventual position of each self-placement level during the 2024 General Election, with the points in between representing the position in the 2017 and 2019 General Elections.

The overall directional movement of the left and right are different. The numbers, representing values in 2015, show the pattern established earlier - the left were best differentiated on economic values, but not so clearly on cultural values. The right could be differentiated by the extremity of their cultural values, but economic values were not so predictive of their left-right self-placement. Between 2015-2019 the movement for most self-placement levels seems to be on the economic (horizontal) dimension. In fact, all self-placement levels move further towards the economic centre between 2015 and 2019, demonstrating that the weakened ability of the economic dimension of values to predict left-right self-placement in this period was driven by individuals across the left-right spectrum.

The directional movements of the left and the right diverge between 2019 and 2024 (demonstrated by the final segment of the arrows). Those identifying on the right continue to move towards the economic centre, further weakening the link between right-wing economic values and right-wing identity. Those identifying between 7-9 on the self-placement scale also became slightly more culturally conservative after 2019, though this is not the case for the most extreme right-wing identifiers at '10' who actually move slightly towards the rest of the right on cultural values.

For those on the left post-2019, the movement increases the multidimensional ideological consistency of the left; they move both towards the economic left and towards cultural liberalism. By 2024, the self-placement position of someone on the left is both representative of their economic *and* cultural values. Those identifying at '0' are on average not just the

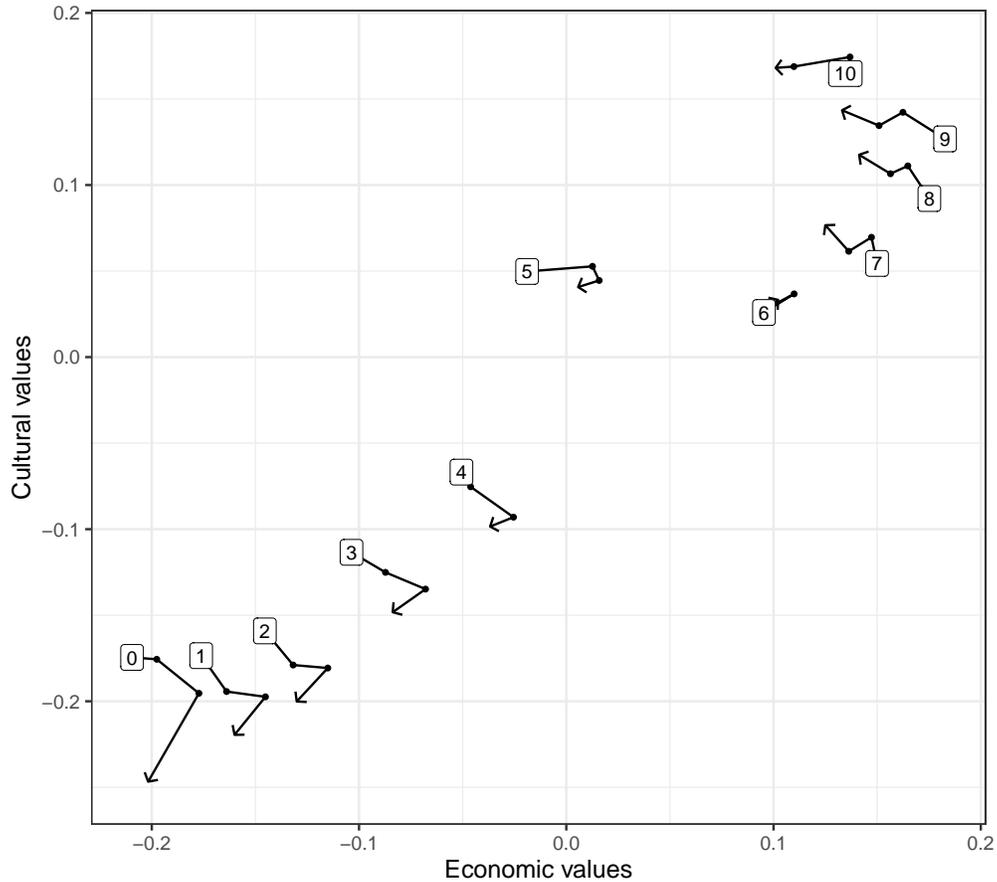


Figure 2.8: The attitudinal positions of self-placement levels as they shift over time

The position of the numbered boxes represent the average two-dimensional attitude scores for the corresponding left-right self-placement level during the first General Election campaign in the data, 2015. The subsequent points represents the average attitudes held by respondents selecting that left-right self-placement level in the subsequent General Elections in 2017 and 2019. The final arrow position represents the average two-dimensional attitude score of each left-right self-placement level during the General Election 2024. Therefore each arrow shows the movement in attitudinal score for each left-right self-placement level from the 2015 General Election to the 2024 General Election.

most economically left-wing but also the most culturally liberal. Those identifying at ‘1’ are then both slightly less economically left, and slightly less culturally liberal than those identifying as ‘0’, and so on this pattern continues for the rest of the left half of the scale. Those identifying on the left of the scale look well sorted in 2024, with the degree of left self-placement being highly correlated with both economic and cultural values.

The result of these divergent movements mean the overall shift in the meaning of the left-right space is driven by different parts of the left-right spectrum. Those identifying the furthest to the right are increasingly moving to the economic centre. This has weakened the link between economic values and left-right self-placement. For the left, the movement is predominantly in the direction of cultural liberalism. Therefore it seems that the weakening link between economic values and left-right self-placement is being driven by the right during this period. The strengthening relationship between cultural values and self-placement is largely driven by the left.

To summarise, by 2024 values on both dimensions are still closely related to someone’s left-right self-placement. However, between 2014 and 2024, economic values become less central, and cultural values more so. Those identifying on the left appear to have become more ideologically consistent across the two dimensions, while identifying on the right seems to increasingly be a predictor of culturally authoritarian values, rather than right-wing economic values.

2.5.4 Issue Importance Over Time

Earlier I analysed the interaction between modal issue importance and values predicting left-right self-placement across the pooled data. Comparing between individuals, there was a relationship between most important issue and which of economic or cultural values are most predictive of someone’s self-placement. Does this pattern look the same when we compare over time? Given that economic values became less predictive of self-placement over time, did this correlate with the issues that were important?

Figure 2.9 presents the proportion of the sample that reported an issue on each dimension as most important for each wave of the data. It was possible for issues to be coded as neither economic or cultural, which is why, for example both proportions are low in 2021 when the most commonly cited most important issue was coronavirus.

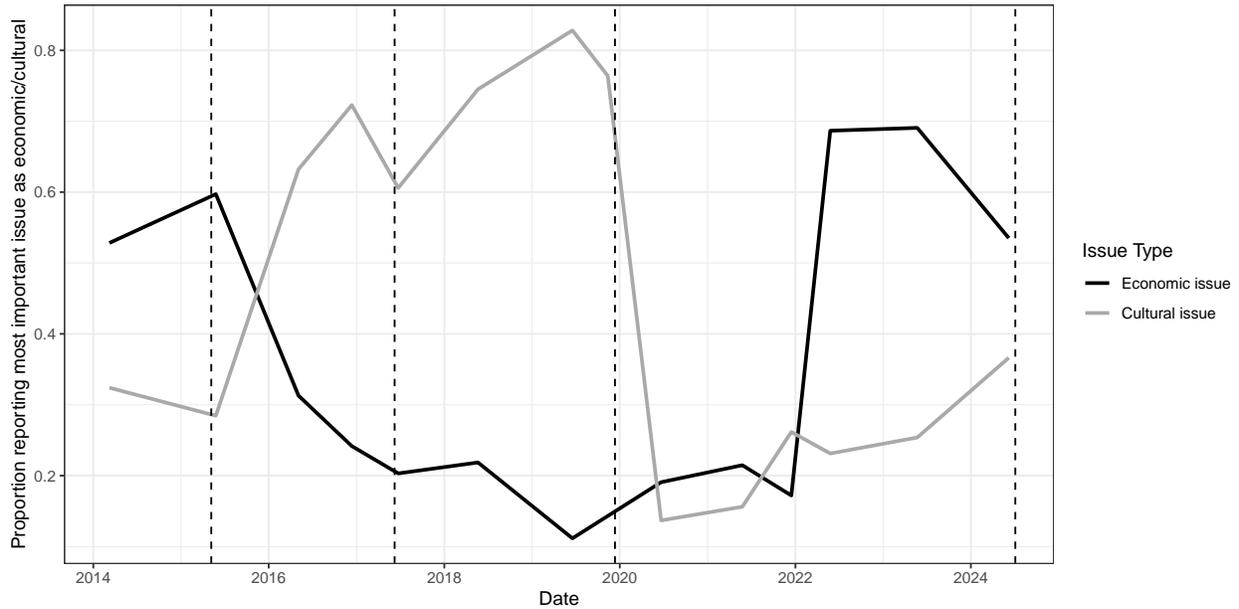


Figure 2.9: Important issue dimensions over time

This figure shows the proportion in each wave who were coded as reporting an issue on each dimension as most important. The vertical dashed lines represent the general elections.

Prior to 2015, economic issues are more likely to be given as the most important issue than a cultural issue. Yet, after the EU referendum, Brexit dominates the most important issue responses, which is coded as a cultural issue. After the pandemic, in 2023, the cost of living crisis is most likely to be listed as the most important issue, which is coded as an economic issue.

Do these most important issues correlate with the relationship between left-right self-placement and operational ideology? The dominance of the cultural issue of Brexit between 2016-2019 might help explain the declining relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement. In 2022, however, an economic issue begins to dominate again. However, this does not mean economic values became more correlated with left-right self-placement

again. As presented earlier in Figure 2.7, in the 2024 General Election, economic values continued to decline in their power to predict left-right self-placement. Despite the cost of living being named as the most important issue by so many respondents, 2024 was the first general election in the sample where cultural values were a better predictor of left-right self-placement than economic values.

The findings for H2c, then, are mixed. Cultural values became more predictive of left-right self-placement as the cultural issue of Brexit dominated responses to the most important issue question. Yet, when an economic issue again became important between 2022-2024, the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement continued to weaken.

2.6 Conclusion

This article builds on previous research about how the left-right scale represents political values. Whilst both economic and cultural values predict left-right self-placement, the relative importance of these dimensions varies both between the left and the right and over time. Self-placement on the left is strongly associated with left economic values, though over time culturally liberal values became more central to a left-wing self-placement than they were before. Someone placing themselves on the right-wing half of the scale is predominantly associated with strong culturally conservative values, and over time has become less associated with holding economically right-wing views. These differences can be explained by the issues important to those on the left and the right - those identifying on the left are more likely to name economic issues as important to them, while those identifying on the right are more likely to name cultural issues such as immigration.

The findings also demonstrate that the meaning of the left-right divide shifts over time. Whilst the left-right divide has traditionally been associated with an economic dimension, between 2014 and 2024 economic values became less strongly associated with left-right self-placement. By the 2024 General Election, left-right self-placement was more correlated with

cultural values than economic values, even in a political context where an economic issue - the cost of living - was highly important to voters.

This paper presents mixed results for the role of issue importance in the relationship between operational and symbolic ideology. While issue importance can help explain differences between the left and right, it was less helpful in explaining changes over time.

This study has implications both for how we think about voters but also for how political scientists should think about ideology measurement. Measures of symbolic ideology can vary in how correlated they are with measures of operational ideology. It is clear that multiple dimensions of ideology can create an environment where voters are divided between left- and right-wing views on different dimensions. Someone's left- or right-wing self-placement can reflect not just the positions they hold on issues, but which dimension of issues are more central to their view of left-right competition. This paper demonstrates that many of those who identify furthest to the right hold economic values seemingly at odds with this strong right-wing identification. This group might be thought to be ideologically confused. However given these right-identifiers strong and consistent cultural conservatism, political scientists may instead view this as a sign of the decreasing relevance of the economic dimension for some who place themselves on the right.

The importance of cultural values has only grown stronger over time. Whilst some might have expected the divisions over cultural issue to have weakened once the UK left the EU, this analysis of the left-right self-placement suggests there may have been a permanent shift in how voters view the political left-right space. Responses to the 'most important issue' question might have suggested that the 2024 General Election was about the cost of living. Nevertheless, the fundamental left-right divide is increasingly about the cultural dimension for voters. This supports propositions of a longer-term Brexit 'realignment' (Cutts et al., 2020; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020; SurrIDGE, 2018). The divisions and identities created during the EU referendum have continued to influence people's conceptions of political divisions even after Brexit itself was no longer the most important issue in British politics (Hobolt, Leeper

and Tilley, 2021; Tilley and Hobolt, 2023).

Whilst the association between the right-wing and cultural values seems to be at the expense of a consistent set of economic values, on the left there seems to be increasing ideological alignment between both dimensions of values and left-wing identity. This paper therefore suggests an additional divide between the left and the right on ideological coherence. This broadly supports earlier findings from the US that found many with operationally left-wing values identified as conservative (Ellis and Stimson, 2012).

This study also has implications for how political scientists should interpret the left-right self-placement scale. The left-right self-placement question should no longer be assumed to reflect economic positions in the UK, and should be expected to change in meaning both over time and between individuals. This supports findings from differential item functioning approaches, which show variation in the usage of the left-right self-placement scale between countries (Lin and Lee, 2024). The present study suggests we should also expect variation in the meaning of the scale within one country.

Finally this study may have implications for how we think about party competition. Given the increasing divide on ideological coherence, parties may be required to use different approaches dependent on which side of the political spectrum they seek to attract. Given that the left increasingly holds both economically left-wing and culturally liberal views, both these sets of policies may be required in tandem to attract left-wing voters. Whereas for voters on the right, strongly culturally conservative policies seem likely to have the broadest appeal. The range of economic values found among those identifying on the right helps explain why radical-right parties may need to ‘blur’ their positions on the economic policy dimension (Koedam, 2021; Rovny and Polk, 2020).. Economic issues being less important to many identifying on the right also helps explain why this is not a deterrent for potential voters of these radical right parties (Dassonneville, Hooghe and Marks, 2024; Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013). In the UK, this helps explain the success of Boris Johnson’s 2019 General Election campaign, which combined a culturally conservative focus on national identity and

sovereignty with economic policies like levelling-up that would appeal to those with centre or even left economic views.

A major caveat of this study is that it is limited in representing only those who were able to place themselves on the left-right scale. Those that didn't place themselves may well be those with the lowest understanding of the concepts of left and right (Otjes and Rekker, 2021). Further study of the conception of the left-right space for those who fail to place themselves on it is required. This study also focussed primarily on the difference between those identifying on the left and right, and further analysis of those identifying in the centre would be useful.

A further limitation in this study is that it has not established a directional relationship between issue salience, values or ideological self-placement. Thus it has aimed to uncover common trends, but is not able provide a causal explanation of why these relationships vary. Thus, questions remain such as whether individuals shift their left-right identity to align with values, or the extent to which people consciously shift their values to align with their own left-right identity. Thus, future research which aims to uncover the directional relationship, or which of values or self-placement are more strongly held, would be useful. Chapter 4 in this thesis uses a survey experiment to assess the impact that priming one dimension of issues may have on the relationship between values and left-right self-placement.

With these limitations in mind, the present study contributes to our understanding of how individuals use the left-right scale, how this varies over time and between individuals within the UK, and how it is related to reported issue importance.

Appendix 2.A Operational ideology (Values) Questions

This section outlines the questions that are used to create the operational ideology value scores. Five questions are used to create the economic scale, and five are used to create the cultural scale. Responses are recorded on a five-point scale from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree"

2.A.1 Economic Values

"How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

- lr1: Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off
- lr2 : Big business takes advantage of ordinary people
- lr3: Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth
- lr4: There is one law for the rich and one for the poor
- lr5: Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance

2.A.2 Cultural values

"How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

- al1: Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values
- al2: For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence
- al3: Schools should teach children to obey authority
- al4: Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards
- al5: People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences

Appendix 2.B Scaling

2.B.1 Economic values

Table 2.3 shows the results of weightings from the Blackbox scaling methodology used to generate values for the ‘Economic values’ score for each individual. See previous appendix for questions. ‘lr1’ receives the largest weighting, which is the question about redistribution. ‘lr2’ receives the smallest weighting, which is the question on management.

Question	N	Stimulus intercept	Stimulus weight	R^2
lr1	451991	3.35	-18.28	0.65
lr2	458749	3.98	-13.82	0.61
lr3	458158	3.84	-16.06	0.72
lr4	460698	3.95	-16.58	0.68
lr5	457557	3.77	-13.41	0.49

Table 2.3: Weights from Blackbox scaling of economic values questions

2.B.2 Cultural values

Table 2.4 presents the results of weightings from the Blackbox scaling methodology used to generate values for the ‘Cultural values’ score for each individual. ‘al2’ (death penalty) receives the largest weighting, while ‘al4’ (censorship) receives the smallest weighting.

Question	N	Stimulus intercept	Stimulus weight	R^2
al1	453949	3.69	-16.46	0.64
al2	450635	3.10	-23.77	0.73
al3	460312	3.71	-14.23	0.55
al4	454675	3.18	-12.90	0.35
al5	457060	3.82	-14.20	0.61

Table 2.4: Weights from Blackbox scaling of cultural values questions

Appendix 2.C Alternative methods of scaling

2.C.1 Principal Components Analysis

Figure 2.10 re-estimates the results shown in Figure 2.7 using principal components analysis to create the operational ideology values scores. Under the principal components analysis, the relative importance of economic and cultural dimension changes slightly, as the relationship between left-right self-placement and cultural values is slightly weaker. However the conclusions of changes over time stay consistent, as economic values continue to weaken in their relationship with left-right self-placement over time.

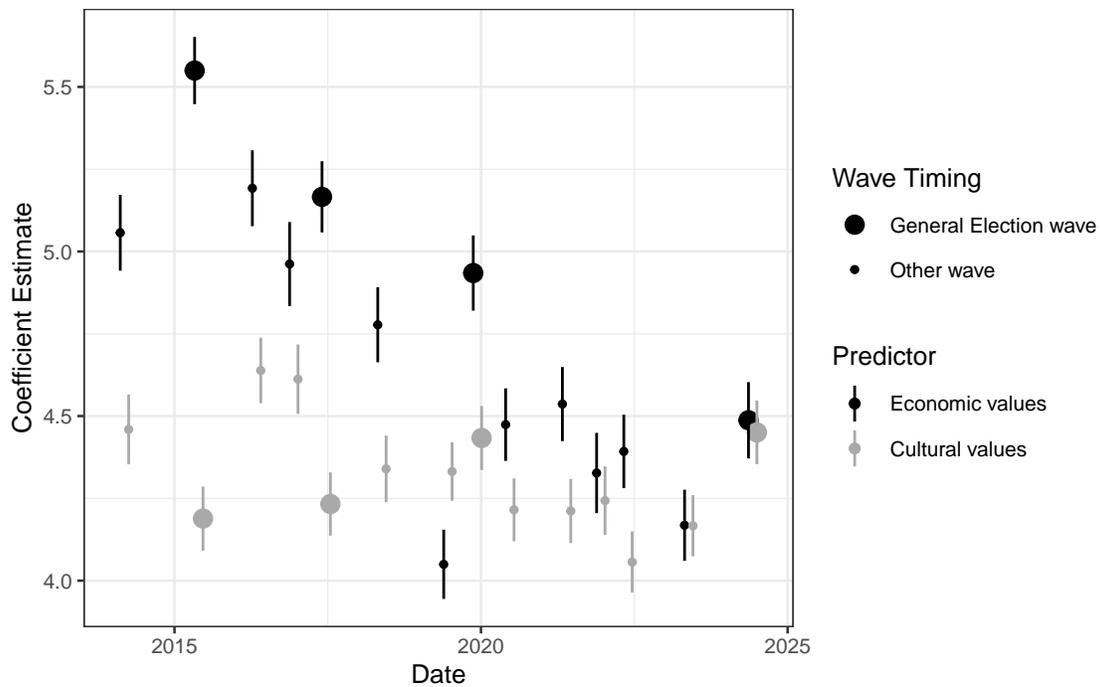


Figure 2.10: Alternative Scaling: Principal Components Analysis

This plot recreates Figure 2.7 after re-creating the economic and cultural values scales using principal components analysis. Under PCA, the cultural values coefficients are slightly smaller. However the changes over time remain consistent with the main model.

Appendix 2.D Results for England only

This paper includes data for all respondents in England, Scotland and Wales who answered the ideological questions. However, in Scotland and Wales, left-right self-placement might be further complicated by the additional cross-cutting dimension of Scottish/Welsh independence. Therefore below I have replicated the results of two of the main findings of this paper to demonstrate the main findings are robust to an England-only sample.

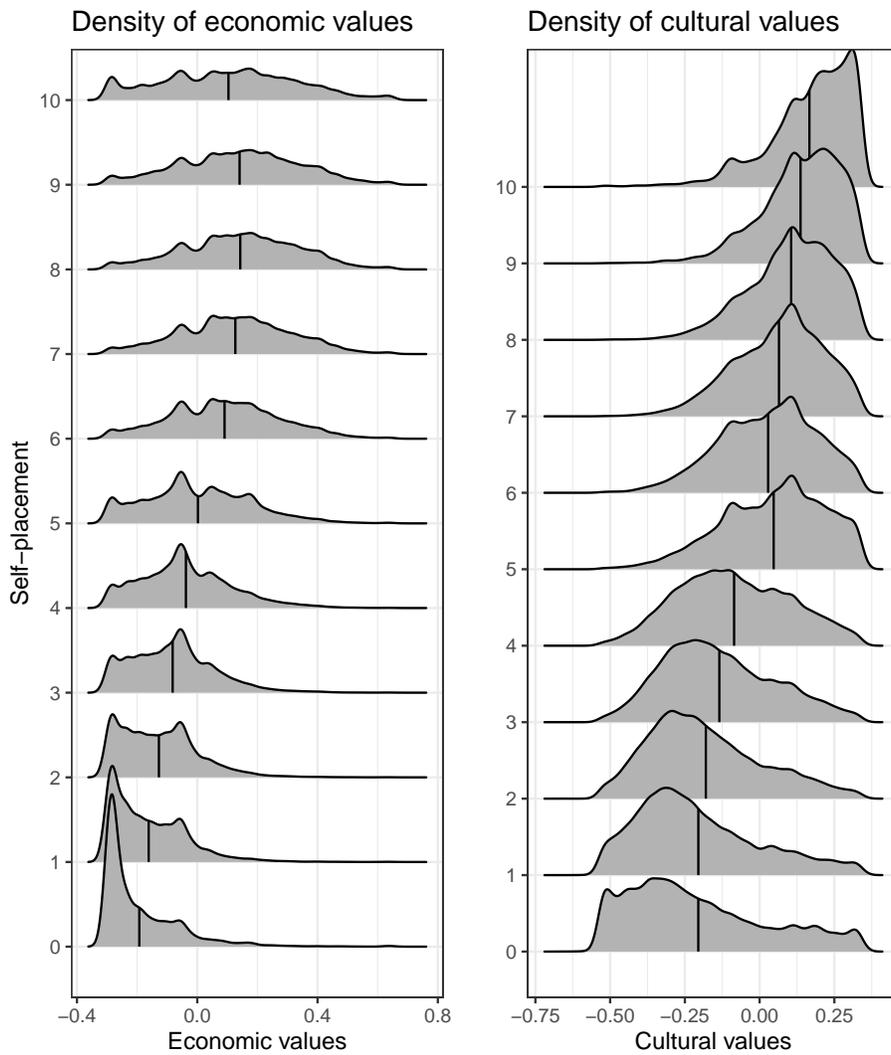


Figure 2.11: A replication of Figure 2.4 with an England-only sample

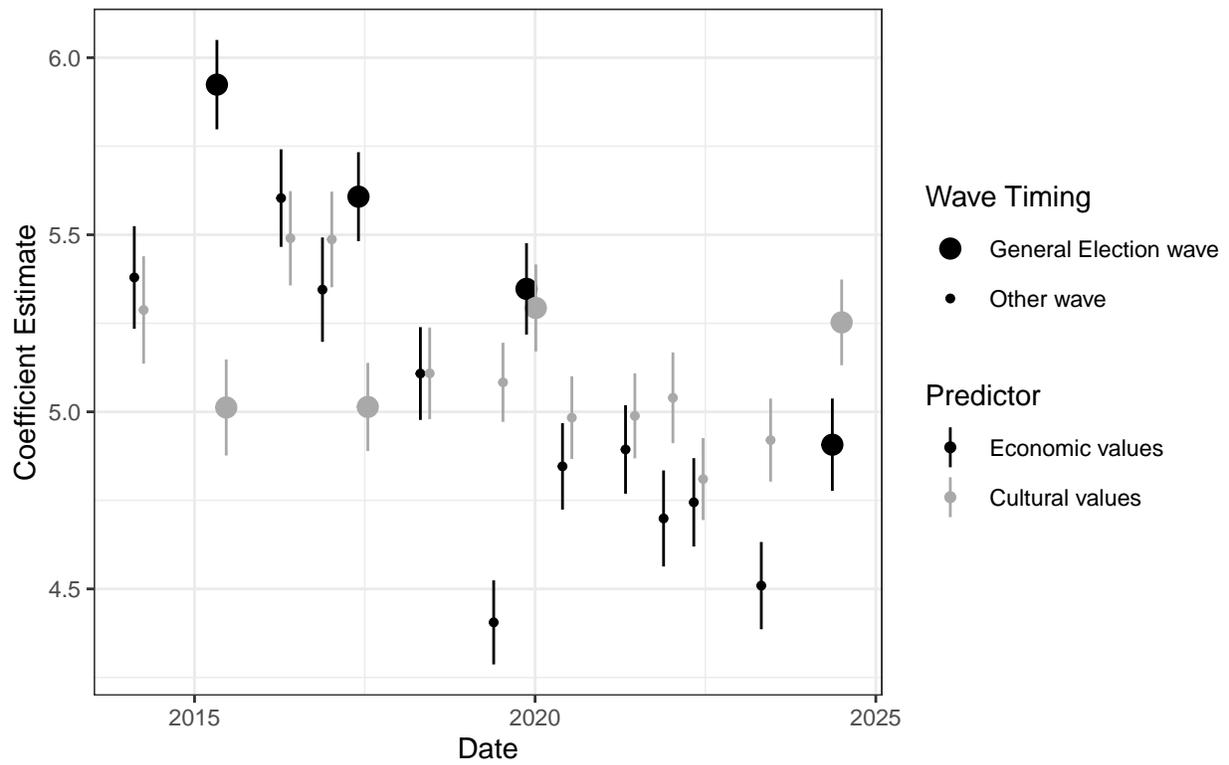


Figure 2.12: A replication of Figure 2.7, using an England-only sample

Chapter 3

Brexit: A Cause or Consequence of Realignment?

Abstract

How did the UK become a country divided by cultural issues in the aftermath of the EU referendum in 2016? Was it simply a continuation of long-term trends of dealignment along the lines of social class? Or did the EU referendum create new awareness of divisions along cultural lines in the UK, pushing voters away from parties they had previously voted for? This chapter focuses on the ideological component of realignment, and how the impact of Brexit looked different between the Labour and Conservative parties, using ten years of British Election Study data. Since their movement towards the economic centre in the 1990s, the Labour party has been accused of moving away from its working class voters. The results of this chapter show that even before the EU referendum, ideological divisions between the party's would-be leavers and remainers existed. Alternatively, the analysis finds that the Conservative party's base looks largely united in the 2015 election, and it is after the EU referendum where Conservative remainers move away from their party, perhaps alienated by the way their party had embraced Brexit. Therefore, whether the EU looks like a cause or simply consequence of realignment depends on which party we focus on. For the Labour party, the EU referendum crystallised existing divisions; for the Conservative party it created them.

3.1 Introduction

Traditionally, the UK has been thought to be divided along the lines of social class (Butler and Stokes, 1974). Party choice has been assumed to be a function of economic preferences. Those who preferred nationalisation, greater equality, and government intervention within the economy voted Labour. Those who preferred private ownership, more personal incentives and more free markets voted Conservative. Yet, in 2016 the EU referendum was held which highlighted new divides within the Conservative and Labour coalitions. Economic issues loomed less large in the EU referendum in 2016 and the following General Elections in 2017 and 2019, where the issues of sovereignty, national identity and immigration moved to the fore. The loss of many long-held Labour seats in the so-called ‘Red Wall’ in the 2019 General Election illustrated a major change in the political landscape. While the 2024 General Election returned economic issues into focus as a result of the cost of living crisis, the electoral map again looked significantly altered, with the Conservative Party losing significant numbers of seats in the ‘Blue Wall’ in the south-east of England to both Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates. This phenomenon fits with definitions of party realignment; “the redistribution of party support associated with the displacement of one political conflict by another” (Carmines and Stimson, 1986, p. 901), caused by the divisions created by Brexit. Yet, given earlier declines in class-based voting, some have argued that this process was underway long before the EU referendum (Evans and Menon, 2017; Evans and Tilley, 2012; Ford and Goodwin, 2014). This has created a debate over whether Brexit was a cause or simply a consequence of a realignment in UK politics, when divisions in the electorate along economic lines are replaced or accompanied by new divisions along the lines of liberal-authoritarian values (Sanders, 2017).

This paper will proceed as follows. First, I review the literature on realignment and dealignment. Then I address both perspectives of the role of Brexit in a realignment. The first perspective is that there has long been a process of dealignment between parties and

social classes, particularly with regards to the Labour Party's loss of working-class support. This suggests that Brexit was a consequence, rather than cause, of any realignment. The second perspective suggests that, while class dealignment had been ongoing, voting between the Conservative and Labour parties was still largely based around economic preferences up to and including the 2015 general election. It was the 2016 EU referendum, and the following elections, where attitudes on a non-economic cultural dimension began to become more important. To test these theories, I analyse the ideological basis of alignment within the Conservative and Labour parties. Secondly, I demonstrate that the evidence for the EU's role in realignment might look different depending on which political party one focuses on.

In this paper I use ten years of British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) data from 2014-2024 to explore the ideological currents within the Labour and Conservative parties. I find that the Labour coalition in 2015 was already divided along cultural lines in a way that the Conservative party was not. Would-be Labour leavers already seemed somewhat aware of a distance between themselves and the party they were voting for. This does not hold for Conservative remainers. Following the EU referendum, both these cross-pressured groups (Labour leavers and Conservative remainers) began to grow more distant from their former party and co-partisans. This divide looks more stark among the Conservative base, where Conservative remainers had been largely indistinguishable from Conservative leavers before the referendum. In summary the EU referendum deepened existing divisions within the Labour coalition, and seems to have created new ones within the Conservative coalition. Whether the referendum looks like a cause or consequence of realignment depends on which party is under consideration.

3.2 Alignment, Realignment and Dealignment

An 'alignment' between parties and voters occurs when a social conflict in the population is incorporated into competition between two parties. Alignments can be underpinned by a

variety of cleavages. Party systems could be built on religious divides, rural-urban divides, or class divisions. Most conceptions of twentieth century British politics generally saw the UK as a political system divided along class-lines and an economic cleavage (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Working-class voters would be expected to vote for the Labour party, while middle- and upper-class voters would be expected to vote for the Conservative party.

The concept of a ‘realignment’ is the idea of structural changes to political competition, where the bases of party support shift to the extent that there is a new, long-lasting alignment between voters and parties. Linkages between parties and voters are likely to be along both ideological and socio-demographic lines. A closely related concept is dealignment, where links between parties and their traditional voters weaken, and are not replaced by new linkages. In this paper I focus particularly on the ideological aspect of realignment, though ideological realignment usually happens alongside shifts in socio-demographic support. For example, partisan ideological disagreements over economic issues have been closely tied with class-based voting in the UK (Heath, Curtice and Jowell, 1985).

A realignment could be the result of a ‘critical election’, where one exceptional single election produces a major change in the linkages between parties and their voters (Key, 1955). In the UK, possible examples include the 1924 and 1945 elections, where there were major changes in the party order (Evans, Norris and Sanders, 1999). Critical realignments, by definition, occur in one specific election or event, but in order to be true realignments the restructuring of the party-voter linkage must be durable. For these reasons, critical realignments are only likely to occur “under events of widespread and powerful impact or issues touching deep emotions” (Key, 1959, p. 198). Alternatively, realignments can happen more gradually. Key (1959) refers to this as “secular realignment”. Secular realignment is the same process of change as a critical realignment, but takes place over a series of elections.

The concept of realignment is closely tied to the concept of ‘issue evolution’, wherein previously dormant issues emerge to become so important, enduring, and partisan in nature,

that they structure party competition (Carmines and Stimson, 1986). The issues do not have to be entirely new, but realignment will only occur when an issue becomes more central to party competition. For an issue evolution to occur, elites must first become re-orientated around the new issue, and only later do the mass public sort themselves into the appropriate party coalitions. When this mass-level reorientation around a new issue is revealed in an election, the change can seem stark. In order for a real issue evolution to have taken place, this re-orientation around an issue must be long-lasting (Carmines and Stimson, 1986). For this reason, it is often difficult to assess whether an issue evolution has occurred until a few elections after the initial realignment.

Both realignment and dealignment depend on the weakening of a previous structure of alignment between parties and their voters. Under a process of realignment, this is replaced by new linkages. Under the process of dealignment, no new, enduring linkage between voters and parties has appeared. For there to be a new alignment, parties and voters must orient around a new social cleavage.

Given the volatility observed in the four General Elections between 2015-2024, it is difficult to maintain that any of 2015, 2017, or 2019 should be described as a critical election. No election established a party-voter linkage which continued to the next election. Given its recency, it is more difficult to evaluate whether the dynamics of the 2024 election represent a critical election. Nevertheless, at the time of writing only a year out from the 2024 General Election, Reform UK now lead in the polls, making it seem unlikely that the patterns of party support observed in the 2024 election will endure.

Nevertheless, the volatility of these recent elections suggests that significant changes are underway. While it is difficult to judge contemporaneously, it seems possible that this period of British politics will resemble a secular change in alignment. Given the instability, it is also difficult to observe exactly what a new alignment between parties and voters would look like. This period of British politics may look more like one of dealignment rather than realignment. However, a period of dealignment may be followed by a new realignment, and the evolution

of the cultural divisions explored in Chapter 2 seem likely to be the foundation of any such new alignment.

A realignment or dealignment along these lines and during this period would not be unique to the UK. New political or partisan divisions have emerged in many European countries (Kriesi et al., 2006). These divisions have often been seen as creating a new ‘dimension’ of political preferences when positions along the dimension are uncorrelated with existing and established political divisions. The name for this new dimension of political preferences is varied. Some focus on a divide between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation (Kriesi et al., 2006), others on ‘cultural’ issues (Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013), or still others on ‘GAL-TAN’ (Dassonneville, Hooghe and Marks, 2024; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002). In this paper, I refer to this as a ‘cultural’ dimension. Regardless of its name, this new dimension has become a more central component of political disagreement.

In multi-party systems, parties are more likely to compete on multiple dimensions of political competition (Lijphart, 2012; Stoll, 2011). In the UK, niche parties, such as the Green Party, UKIP, and Reform UK emerged as single-issue parties, with their single issues being on the new cultural dimension (Carter, 2008; Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Vasilopoulou, 2020). However, the Conservative and Labour party have traditionally competed along an economic dimension, with the Labour Party representing the economic left and the Conservative Party representing the economic right. Whilst these parties have frequently held different positions on cultural issues, their party bases have historically been most visibly differentiated by their positions on economic issues. This paper will focus primarily on the competition and electoral bases of the two major parties, and how and particularly *when* they became internally divided along cultural lines - lines that were highlighted by the EU referendum.

This paper considers the role that the EU referendum has played in the process of realignment in the UK. Was the referendum the result of a (secular) realignment already taking place? Or, was the EU referendum itself a turning point (a critical moment) that caused changes in the alignment between parties and their voters? I explore both perspectives below.

3.2.1 Dealignment as a result of long-term trends

Many scholars argue that the UK had already been in a long process of dealignment before 2016, with the class basis of party choice weakening well before the EU referendum (Cutts et al., 2020; Evans and Norris, 1999; Evans and Tilley, 2012; Särilvik and Crewe, 1983). At the same time, electoral competition increasingly reflected a socio-cultural axis, so that identity issues such as Europe, immigration, and nationalism gained weight relative to the traditional economic cleavage (Kriesi et al., 2006; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

One viewpoint is that 1997 was itself a critical realignment where the class-based structure of the UK fell apart (Evans, Norris and Sanders, 1999). The Labour Party was traditionally viewed as a party representing the working classes and on the economic left throughout the twentieth century. It then underwent significant changes and moved towards the economic centre in the 1990s under Tony Blair (SurrIDGE, 2018). This meant there was convergence between the two major parties on economic issues in the 1997 General Election. The Labour party attracted many middle-class voters, meaning it was no longer as reliant on votes from a shrinking working class. For some, it was this convergence and lack of differentiation between the parties that led to a decline in class as a determinant of party choice (Evans and Norris, 1999; Evans and Tilley, 2012). In its immediate aftermath, 1997 was proposed to be a critical election of its own, given the shifts in both Labour's economic ideology and its support from working-class voters (Evans, Norris and Sanders, 1999). From this perspective, the changes witnessed after the EU referendum was just the continuation of a realignment that had *really* begun in 1997.

However, another perspective suggests that 1997 was itself just part of a trend that had begun earlier. As soon as political scientists used survey data to establish the class-based alignment of British politics, they began to question whether it was declining. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) famously used the UK as an example of a strong class-based party system. Nevertheless, they suggest that the class-basis of the political system could be at risk by the 1959 general election due to the increasing prosperity of the working-classes. Equally,

their book contained a detailed analysis of the history of working-class Tories, dating back to the nineteenth century (McKenzie and Silver, 1968). Butler and Stokes (1974) explored strong linkages between social class and voting, but also discussed the weakening of the alignment in the 1960s. They offered explanations such as the decrease in the proportion of the parliamentary Labour party that were themselves working-class (Bellucci and Heath, 2012; Butler and Stokes, 1974). For some, any decline in class voting was the inevitable consequence of the changing structure of social class itself over time due to deindustrialisation (McAllister and Rose, 1986). Clearly, the proposition that the class-based alignment of British politics was solely broken by the EU referendum, or by New Labour, ignores a century of working-class Toryism and earlier clues of the class-based dealignment.

Nevertheless, statistical analyses of class-based voting can identify periods in British politics when the partisan-class alignment was at its strongest and when it weakened. One of the difficulties of this exercise is disagreements about how exactly to measure social class or the class alignment (Scarborough, 1987). Despite these challenges, most studies suggest that the class-party alignment reached its height in the 1950s or early 1960s, and began declining by the 1960s and 1970s (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Crewe, 1983; Scarborough, 1987). For example, while two-thirds of voters voted along expected class lines in the 1960s, this had dropped to less than half by 1983 (Scarborough, 1987).

By the 1980s, the idea of the ‘traditional working-class’ base of the Labour party already seemed outdated. The Conservative party under Thatcher had many policies that appealed to higher-wage manual workers, such as policies cutting income tax and encouraging local authorities to sell off council housing at a discounted rate to tenants (Crewe, 1986). Whilst class-based dealignment did not begin in response to the EU referendum, it also did not begin in 1997. The book detailing the British Election Study’s findings of the 1979 general election was titled ‘Decade of Dealignment’, so evident was the dealignment between social class and party loyalty (Särilvik and Crewe, 1983). From this perspective, New Labour’s move towards the economic centre can as much be seen as a reaction to the changing economic preferences

of contemporary working-class voters, rather than a rejection of them (Sanders and Brynin, 1999).

Alongside the decline of class-based politics in the latter half of the twentieth century, the Conservative and Labour parties began to be more differentiated on social policies such as immigration. Historically, the larger divide on immigration had been between voters and political elites, rather than between the parties themselves, with immigration being much less popular among the public than policy suggested. Sobolewska and Ford (2020) use British Election Study data to show that there was little differentiation between the parties on immigration in the 1960s, despite the strong interest in immigration at the mass level. For example, Conservative leader Edward Heath sacked Enoch Powell after his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in 1968. This demonstrated the divide between the public and political elites, as Powell’s speech was very popular among the public. While the public might have been divided by the issue of immigration, it could not replace economics as a political cleavage while the two major parties failed to take distinct positions on it. Politicians such as Heath were reluctant to organise around issues of immigration in the 1960s and 1970s (Sobolewska, 2021). Nevertheless, as Powell continued to sit as a Conservative MP, some of the public began to see the Conservative Party as the more anti-immigration party, and this perception continued under Thatcher’s government (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

As perceptions of the gap between parties on immigration grew, and Labour’s reputation as an economically left-wing party declined, left-authoritarians would have had less reason to stick to supporting the Labour Party. Indeed, many working-class Labour voters defected during the General Elections in 1997, 2001, 2005, and 2010 (Evans and Mellon, 2016). Evidently, the Labour Party had lost at least some of its traditional support base long before the EU referendum.

Another way that the post-Brexit era echoes earlier claims of dealignment is the fragmentation of the party system and increasing popularity of third parties. In England, the two-party Conservative/Labour share of seats stayed above 90 per cent between 1931 and

1997, and the share of votes for the two parties similarly declined between 1974 and 2010 (Bartle, 2021). In the 1983 General Election, the newly formed SDP-Liberal Alliance achieved the highest vote share of any third party since 1931 (Heath, Curtice and Jowell, 1985). In the aftermath of the Brexit election, the vote-share of the two-major parties has fluctuated; In the 2017 general election the two-party vote share reached a height of 82 per cent, the highest it had been in decades (Bartle, 2021). However, it declined to 76 per cent by 2019, and to around 60 per cent in 2024.

Alongside any dealignment along class-lines and volatility in the two-party system, there had also been a long-time decline in voters reporting any partisanship, and a decline in strength of identification, even when it was held (Fieldhouse et al., 2023). Fieldhouse et al. (2023) argue that a series of electoral shocks, including the global financial crisis, led to a collapse in partisanship that opened the possibility of high rates of individual-level volatility in voting behaviour between the General Elections of 2015, 2017 and 2019. This volatility continued into 2024. Even before the EU referendum, partisanship had declined. From highs of over 80 per cent of voters identifying with one of the two main parties in the 1960s, this had declined to 70 per cent in 1983 (Särilvik and Crewe, 1983). By 2010, only 15 per cent of voters had a strong attachment to their party (Sanders, 2017).

Evidently, the high point of the UK's two-party class-based party system was long before the EU referendum in 2016. Many of the trends in realignment occurring after the EU referendum had their roots much earlier (Sanders, 2017).

3.2.2 Brexit as the trigger for a realignment

There were signs of realignment prior to the referendum. Nevertheless, it is still possible that the EU referendum represented a significant and necessary turning point in the alignment between parties and their voters. Key's requirement for a critical alignment event was for an issue "of widespread and powerful impact touching deep emotions" (Key, 1959, p.198). The UK's 2016 EU referendum appears to be a good candidate for such an event. While

class dealignment had started during the twentieth century, economic preferences remained a substantial predictor of party vote choice in general elections before 2016. While there may have been some class dealignment underway, the ideological basis of a realignment - wherein a new issue cleavage replaced the role of economic disagreements - was not yet clarified. In the following section I discuss how the EU referendum may have been the turning point for a realignment.

The analysis of this paper relies on the fact that in 2015, the Conservative and Labour parties both held voters who would go on to vote both 'Leave' and 'Remain'. Conservative 'remainers' and Labour 'leavers' were cross-pressured between their party and Brexit choice, particularly in 2019 when the Conservative party had proposed leaving the EU without a deal and the Labour party had proposed a second referendum. The existence of these cross-pressured voters suggested that there was the potential for plenty of sorting of voters along referendum lines to come. Further evidence for the impact of Brexit can be found by exploring how the 2015 election, immediately preceding the referendum, looked very different to the General Elections in 2017, 2019 and 2024.

Under David Cameron's leadership of the Conservative party, he had modernised the party in part by calling for the party to 'stop banging on' about Europe. However, the rise in support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) between 2010 and 2015 put pressure on the Conservative Party to focus again on Europe, and led it to propose an 'in-out' referendum on EU membership as part of their 2015 General Election campaign. However, the gap between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party on economic issues - which had been shrinking in earlier elections - was larger again by 2015, under the leadership of Ed Miliband (SurrIDGE, 2018). Many political scientists had discussed class-based dealignment in the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, economic values continued to predict vote choices between the two parties, much more than cultural values. When a battery of liberal-authoritarian (cultural) values questions were introduced into the British Election Study, they failed to predict voting between the Labour and Conservative Parties in 1985 and 1986 (Evans, Heath

and Lalljee, 1996). Even in 2015, economic values were much more able to predict voting between the two major parties than cultural values in 2015 (Fieldhouse et al., 2019, p. 174).

In the elections following the EU referendum, preferences on cultural issues became increasingly important, to the extent that the two dimensions were equally important predictors of vote choice between the Labour and Conservative parties by 2017 (Fieldhouse et al., 2019). While cultural conservatism may have led some to defect from the Labour party in earlier elections, it was 2017 where cultural values began to more decisively differentiate between Labour and Conservative voters. The findings from Chapter 2 demonstrated that cultural values became increasingly central even to the overall understanding of the left-right dimension in the wake of the Brexit referendum.

While less significant to party choice in 2015 than economic values, cultural values were closely correlated with votes in the Brexit referendum. It seems likely that divisions over Brexit were a direct cause of the changes in the importance of the cultural dimension in determining vote choice. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Eurosceptics became more likely to support the Conservative party, while Europhiles in the Conservative party became more likely to defect (Schonfeld and Winter-Levy, 2021). By 2019, as the Labour and Conservative parties took more distinct positions on Brexit, voting was even more structured by the Brexit vote than it had been in 2017 (Fieldhouse et al., 2023).

A related factor in the importance of the EU referendum itself in reshaping the election is the formation of identities along the lines of the EU referendum. While partisanship has declined, research has demonstrated that the choices voters made in 2016 forged new identities and persisted long after the referendum (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2021). Even as recently as 2022, significant proportions of the electorate continue to hold identities as ‘leavers’ or ‘remainers’ (Tilley and Hobolt, 2023). These identities act like partisan identities as voters have affectively polarised around them, holding biases and prejudices towards those on the opposing side (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2021). Voters perceive the political preferences associated with these identities beyond Brexit choice itself; for example, remainers are per-

ceived to be more economically and culturally liberal on a range of issues (Tilley and Hobolt, 2023).

Whilst class-based dealignment was long underway before the referendum, the EU referendum seemed to have acted as a ‘turning point’ where party choice began to be more structured around both referendum identities and cultural attitudes more broadly, given that the two are highly correlated. (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020) suggest that while divisions within the parties on cultural issues had been forming for a long time, it was the Brexit referendum that clarified them. This was when the public became “self-aware” of the differences between them and fellow partisans who sat on the opposite side of the Brexit debate. This awareness of Brexit divisions can be seen clearly through the strong identities formed after the date.

Given that Brexit identities are an intrinsically post-Brexit phenomenon, there is no direct comparison to be made with an earlier ‘pre-Brexit identity’ surrounding one’s cultural conservatism or liberalism. However, one identity measured both before and after the referendum is ideological left-right self-placement. I examine how this has changed to align with Brexit choice, or whether voting has just shifted to reflect cultural values that had existed before the referendum but were not previously influential on vote choice.

3.3 Ideology

Much discussion of dealignment and realignment, both pre- and post-EU referendum, has focused on the demographic and geographic linkages between people and the parties they vote for (Crewe, 1983; Heath, Curtice and Jowell, 1983; Jennings and Stoker, 2017). Instead, in this paper I focus on the ideological bases of alignment between parties and voters, that often accompany a group-based cleavage. I use two measures of ideology to help understand the existence of ideological realignment within the two parties. Ellis and Stimson (2012) outline the difference between these two measures of ideology which they name ‘symbolic ideology’ and ‘operational ideology’. Symbolic ideology is a form of ideological identity, measured

in the UK by asking people to place themselves on a left-right scale. Like partisanship, or leave/remain identities, this measure of ideology reflects how people see themselves in comparison with their political environment. The other measure of ideology Ellis and Stimson (2012) outline is ‘operational ideology’. These could be thought of as someone’s ‘core values’ or political preferences. These are generally measured by a series of questions that seek to understand the latent ideology voters hold. They relate to enduring partisan disagreements, without necessarily referring to contemporary policy arguments. Operational ideology is increasingly understood to incorporate more than one dimension of politics (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). The first dimension is the traditional economic dimension. The second dimension I refer to here, and of increasing in relevance in many countries, is one which divides populations into social liberals and social conservatives (Kriesi et al., 2006). These two dimensions explain much of the latent ideological space in British politics (Vivyan, Lauderdale and Hanretty, 2026). Using measures of operational ideology can be helpful to understand how latent ideological values may have predicted Brexit voting, and how divisions after the referendum may have shifted values.

3.3.1 Non-ideological determinants of vote choice

While this paper focuses on ideology and how this helps explain realignment in British politics, there are of course non-ideological reasons why voters support or move between parties.

One of these reasons is valence politics - as an alternative to the ideological spatial model of vote choice, the valence model of politics theorises that voters make choices based on performance-based judgements (Clarke et al., 2004). In these cases, preferences are often aligned within the population - such as a desire for low levels of inflation and unemployment - so vote choice is made based on the party that is perceived to be most competent and likely to achieve this goal (Clarke et al., 2009). In the context under consideration in this paper, we can consider the 2019 election and a voter who has little preference on the UK’s relationship

with the EU, and simply votes Conservative on the belief that they are the party most likely to 'get Brexit done' as was a major part of the party's election campaign.

Another non-ideological explainer of voter choice is identity-based cleavages within the electorate. These are often closely related to ideological divisions, though the process of how the divisions are formed focuses instead on identity-based explanations, rather than through the lens of ideology and spatial theories of voting. For example, Kriesi et al. (2006) explore how globalisation has formed a new division between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation. This theory suggests that a new political divide has emerged between those employees and citizens who have benefited from their economy opening up to international markets, versus those with stronger national identities and those for whom international competition creates more of a threat to their livelihood. This cleavage aligns with the cultural dimension I discuss in this chapter.

This paper does not argue that these factors are unimportant in understanding vote choice. That said, it instead focuses on the ideological divisions within the parties.

3.3.2 Asymmetry between parties

The dealignment associated with Brexit is a process that impacted voters across the political spectrum. Both the Conservative party and Labour party had voter bases that were divided by EU referendum votes (see Table 3.1). Both the groups of Labour 'leavers' and Conservative 'remainers' were cross-pressured between their party choice and their referendum choice. Around a third of each party's 2015 vote base held views that put them out of step with the rest of their party on views towards the EU. This proportion was both small enough for these cross-pressured groups to be the obvious minority within their party, but large enough to be a potential problem for their party too. If the issue of Brexit was important to these voters and they were unlikely to change their minds, these voters would be subject to conflicting motivations between partisanship and Brexit preferences.

There are reasons to expect divergent patterns of realignment within the party bases.

	Conservative	Labour
Leave	Conservative leaver (31.3%)	Labour leaver (13.8%)
Remain	Conservative remainder (19.3%)	Labour remainder (35.7%)

Table 3.1: Cross-pressured voters after the 2016 referendum

Both labour leavers and conservative remainers would have been cross-pressured, as they both held the minority referendum position within their party. The percentages represent the percentage of the combined 2015 Labour and Conservative vote share which each group made up.

For example, in a discussion of whether the 1997 election consisted of a critical election, Evans and Norris (1999) argued that the ideological base of the Labour party looked to have transformed much more significantly between 1992-1997 than the Conservative party.

There are many reasons why 2015 Labour voters, who would go on to vote ‘leave’ in the 2016 EU referendum, might have recognised a growing distance between themselves and ‘their’ Party. The party’s strategic movement towards the economic centre came alongside culturally liberal policies. New Labour embraced multiculturalism, and were seen to have a more positive view of immigration as a way to improve growth. This included the decision not to impose controls on migration in response to the expansion of the EU. This created a new wave of immigration in the 2000s from central and Eastern Europe. From the early 2000s, immigration became more visible in the UK (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

As well as the change in immigration policies which may have been off-putting to its left-authoritarian base, the image of Labour as a party of the working-classes continued to decline. This was illustrated through the changing membership of the Parliamentary Labour Party, which, through the professionalisation of politics, had continued to become less working-class over time (Allen, 2018; Bellucci and Heath, 2012). Economically left and culturally conservative voters might have been more unsure about their place in the Labour Party.

Conservative remainers were unlikely to have as many reasons to feel conflicted about their loyalties to the Conservative Party in the years before the EU referendum. The Conservative Party under David Cameron was in many ways socially liberal. In the early days of his leadership election, Cameron had carefully avoided talking about Europe or immigration

(Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010). Under the 2010-2015 coalition government, same-sex marriage was legalised, though without the support of the majority of Conservative MPs. Whilst UKIP was on the rise, Cameron was acutely aware that appealing too strongly to potential UKIP defectors could alienate more socially liberal voters of the party, including ethnic minority voters they had aimed to attract in 2010 (Cowley, 2016). Meanwhile, support for the Liberal Democrats collapsed almost as soon as they had entered the coalition in 2010 (Cutts and Russell, 2015; Green and Prosser, 2016). This meant liberal Conservatives had little incentive by 2015 to desert their party. The Conservative Party in 2015 was in more danger of losing their culturally conservative base to UKIP. Before the referendum, Labour leavers had more reason to feel less attached to the left, in a way that was not paralleled by Conservative-voting remainers and the right.

After the referendum, the situation began to look different. Signals from the Conservative party on Brexit were much stronger than those coming from the Labour party. In the aftermath of the EU referendum, David Cameron was replaced as Prime Minister by Theresa May, who, despite having campaigned for ‘Remain’, promised to deliver Brexit, proclaiming “Brexit means Brexit”. In 2019, she was replaced by Boris Johnson, who was even more popular among cultural conservatives. The Conservative party image changed significantly between the 2015 General Election under David Cameron and the 2019 General Election under Boris Johnson.

Meanwhile, the major change in the Labour Party was the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader after Labour’s defeat in 2015. Corbyn both moved the party towards the economic left and obscured the party’s position on Brexit. Corbyn himself was seen as a ‘reluctant Remainer’ and was frequently criticised for his lack of clarity over the party’s Brexit position. Whether deliberate strategically, or simply a function of Corbyn’s own distance from the majority of his party on Brexit, the party’s ‘blurry’ position on Brexit seemed to work better in 2017 than 2019 (Avril, 2021; Johns, 2021).

One reason for the divergence between the parties may have simply been the pressures of

being a party in government, rather than one in opposition. Jeremy Corbyn could have an unclear position on Brexit from opposition, whilst on the other hand Conservative leaders were forced to take decisive positions on Brexit whilst they actively legislated the UK's exit from the EU. The consequence of this was that the Labour party after the referendum may have been less alienating for cross-pressured Labour leavers, than if Labour had embraced the 'Remain' position more strongly.

While there were cross-pressured voters among both party bases, the trajectories of these two cross-pressured groups look different. Cultural conservatives inclined to vote Labour may have become more aware of the contradictions between their cultural positions and their preferred party before the referendum, while Remain-voting Conservatives may have felt more alienated from their party after the referendum.

I therefore expect response to the question of whether Brexit was the cause or consequence of a realignment in UK politics to be different between the parties. The 2015 Labour Party coalition was more ideologically divided along EU referendum lines before the referendum. This contrasts with the Conservative coalition, for whom ideological divisions emerged *after* and *along the lines of* the EU referendum.

This theory is stated formally as hypotheses below:

H1: Pre-referendum measures of ideology predict Leave/Remain voting within the Labour coalition, but not the Conservative coalition.

H2: Leave/Remain voting predicts post-referendum ideological and voting shifts within the pre-referendum Conservative coalition.

H2 does not require that the Labour coalition are *undivided* post-referendum. However, if H1 is true, these divisions will remain from prior to the referendum. For this reason, H2 focuses on the divisions that emerge within the Conservative coalition of voters.

3.4 Data

This chapter uses data from the British Election Study Internet Panel, consisting of 29 waves between March 2014 and July 2024 (Fieldhouse et al., 2024). Of these 29 waves, 14 contained data on the main ideology variables of interest. I then filtered to those who voted Labour or Conservative in 2015, to capture the bases of the two parties at this point. For the ideology analysis, the sample then included 282,332 observations, averaging around 20,000 respondents for each of the 14 waves. For the final set of models, I model vote choice in the General Elections 2017, 2019 and 2024. I included all respondents where I had data for both their vote choice in the 2015, as well as the relevant later General Election (2017, 2019 or 2024). Due to survey attrition, the sample is smaller when predicting 2024 vote choice. This is because, while the sample size stays consistent across waves, a respondent would have had to provide vote choice for both 2015 and 2024. Given the time between these elections (and the fact that many 2024 voters may not have even been old enough to vote in 2015), this means the models for 2024 have a smaller sample size than the models for 2015 and 2017 vote.

In this paper I focus on the four groups that were highlighted earlier in Table 3.1; Conservative leavers, Conservative remainers, Labour leavers and Labour remainers. I define these groups by their 2015 vote for either the Labour or Conservative parties, and their 2016 referendum vote. I compare these same groups over time. To be sure, in reality some of these people will have switched their preferred party and attitudes towards Brexit. However, since this study focuses on cross-pressured individuals, fixing the groups at one point in time allows us to assess the change in self-reported ideology for these same groups of people over time, without worrying that the changing composition of the groups causes the changes in outcome measures. Since BESIP is a panel study, vote choice at a General Election or in the EU referendum is recorded either in the panel wave immediately following the election/referendum, or retrospectively in the earliest wave that the respondent participated in afterwards.

To assess realignment over time, I focus particularly on ideology. To operationalise ideology, I use two measures.

The first is a measure of symbolic ideology - where people place themselves on an 11-point left-right scale. The second is two measures of operational ideology, which is divided into a score on economic values and a score of cultural values, for each individual for each wave. These scores are calculated through using Blackbox scaling to transform five economic questions into an economic values score, and five liberal-authoritarian questions into a cultural values score. These questions and scalings can be found in the Appendix for the previous chapter.

I am also interested in whether voters switch away from their 2015 vote choice in subsequent General Elections. For these analyses I use reported vote choice measures from the 2017, 2019, and 2024 post-election waves.

The final outcome measure that I assess is voters' perceptions of party positions. I track how people view the Conservative and Labour parties over time. There are three measures that I use to do this. Firstly, respondents are asked where they place parties on the left-right scale overall, using the same 11-point left-right scale they place themselves on. I also use two questions that ask voters to locate parties on the 11-point scale for economic positions and cultural positions.

To establish whether a realignment was a cause or consequence of Brexit I analyse measures of ideology both before and after the referendum. Pre-referendum measures are taken from responses in the 2015 post-election wave. This wave was before the EU referendum, so in order to sort my respondents by their EU referendum preferences I use their reported referendum vote in 2016. This allows me to sort individuals into those who would go on to vote leave and those who would go on to vote remain. This enables me to analyse the divisions that existed before the referendum.

For post-referendum analyses of ideology, analyses use data from the whole period 2014-2024, to assess long-term trends. I also make use of the General Election waves to capture

vote change post-Brexit.

3.4.1 Empirical approach

To address my hypotheses empirically, I use a combination of graphical presentations of data and modelling. The graphs are particularly helpful at demonstrating the spatial positioning of voters in the ideological space.

I use linear models to formally test H1 and H2. To test H1 (Pre-referendum measures of ideology predict Leave/Remain voting within the Labour coalition, but not the Conservative coalition), I introduce a model which uses 2015 measures of ideology to predict Leave/Remain vote, separately for the Labour and Conservative coalitions. To test H2 (Leave/Remain voting predicts post-referendum ideological and voting shifts within the pre-referendum Conservative coalition) I present a series of models using referendum vote choice to predict voting in 2017, 2019 and 2024 General Elections, separately for Conservative and Labour voters. In all of these models, while the dependent variable is a binary outcome, I use linear models for ease of interpretation. This means, for example when using referendum choice to predict voting Labour in 2017, a coefficient of e.g. 0.1 for voting remain would mean that a remain voter is predicted to have a 10 percentage points higher likelihood of voting Labour than someone who had voted Leave. In the main models presented, I also do not include controls, as this allows an analysis of the R-squared. This is helpful when comparing between the models for Labour and Conservative coalitions. For example, it is of interest here to know how much of the variation in voting patterns are explained by referendum vote choice alone.

While the main models in this paper use linear models for binary outcome variables, I include logistic models in the appendix to confirm that the results remain robust.

3.5 Results and Discussion

To answer my research questions, I address both the claim that Brexit was a consequence of a realignment that was already in motion before the referendum itself, and the counter-claim that Brexit was a cause of the realignment. To operationalise this, I first focus on evidence gathered during the 2015 election. As this was only a year before the referendum, any ideological realignment already in motion should be visible then. I then examine ideological realignment in the post-referendum period. Here, I analyse a longer time period post-referendum.

3.5.1 Pre-referendum divisions within the Conservative and Labour coalitions

In the General Election of 2015, while the EU referendum was on the table (via the Conservative manifesto) it was clearly not the major driver of vote choice. The referendum was a hypothetical possibility. Both parties had supporters who would become remainers and leavers, but these preferences had not yet been activated as identities. Could the intra-party divisions over Brexit have been predicted by attitudes and identities held during the 2015 election?

Firstly, we can consider the attitudes of voters, dividing them by both 2015 vote choice, and how they would go on to vote in the referendum one year later. Figure 3.1 shows the average operational ideology of voters, split by 2015 vote choice and referendum vote. This illustrates a pattern noted by others (Fieldhouse et al., 2019). In 2015 vote choice is much more related to the economic dimension, whilst the divide between leavers and remainers is one of cultural values. That is, within both the Conservative and Labour 2015 bases, there is little difference between leavers and remainers on economic values. Indeed, Labour leavers even seem slightly to the left of Labour remainers on economic values. However, even in

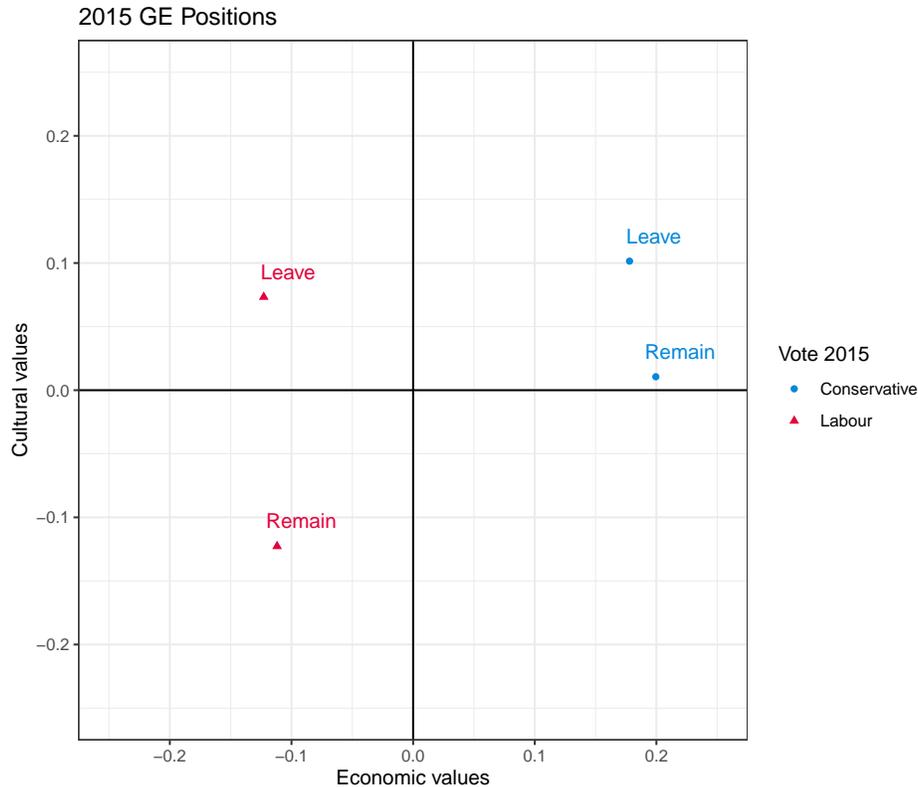


Figure 3.1: Operational Ideology in 2015

This plot shows values on both dimensions during the 2015 General Election. Economic values are on the x-axis, with negative scores representing values left of the mean. Cultural values are represented on the y-axis, with negative values being more liberal than the mean.

2015, those who would go on to vote leave are more culturally conservative than those who would go on to vote remain.

Comparing the two party bases, the divide within the Labour party appears much greater. Labour voters in 2015 who would go on to vote ‘Leave’ are on average as culturally conservative as Conservative leavers, whilst Conservative remainers are still, on average, closer to other Conservative voters on cultural values than they are to Labour remainers.

Figure 3.2 displays the cultural values of the four groups in more detail, through their densities as well as their mean. Echoing earlier findings about the left-right divide in chapter 2, the Labour vote base contains a wider range of cultural values than the Conservative vote base. Whilst there is some overlap in the middle, the Labour party appears divided

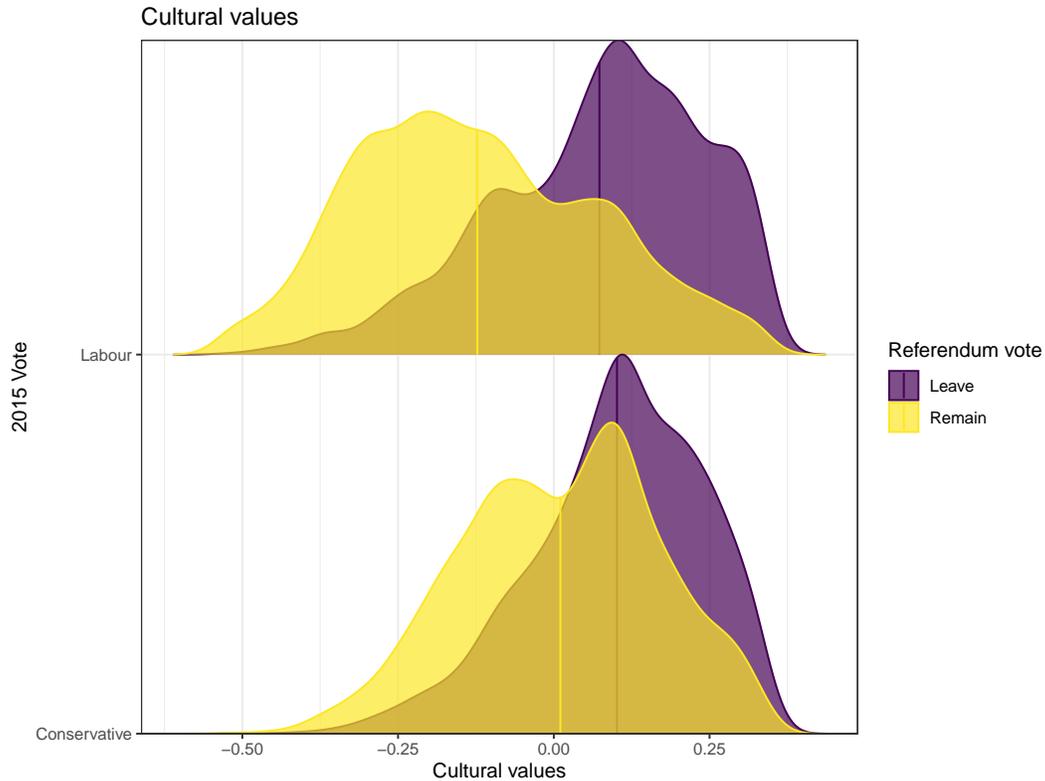


Figure 3.2: Densities of cultural values in 2015
Groups are divided by 2015 vote on the y-axis, with Labour voters at the top and Conservative voters at the bottom. The colours divide these voters by how they will go on to vote in the EU referendum in 2016. The vertical lines represent the mean social attitudes within each group.

on cultural values; those who go on to vote leave look much more culturally conservative than those who go on to vote remain. Conservative leavers and remainers look much more similar. Conservative leavers hold cultural values similar to Labour leavers. The distribution of cultural values for Conservative remainers is bimodal. Many in this group also hold cultural values that are very similar to the leavers in both parties. However, some of this group hold cultural values more in line with Labour remainers. Overall, the 2015 divisions within the Labour base over cultural value look a lot sharper than those in the Conservative base.

A separate, but related question, is whether voters were themselves conscious of these differences. To measure this, I have condensed the self-placement scale into three categories, “Left”, “Right” and “Centre”. Again, voters are divided into their 2015 vote and 2016 referendum vote. Their responses to the self-placement question are presented in Figure 3.3, from

the 2015 post-election wave of the BESIP.

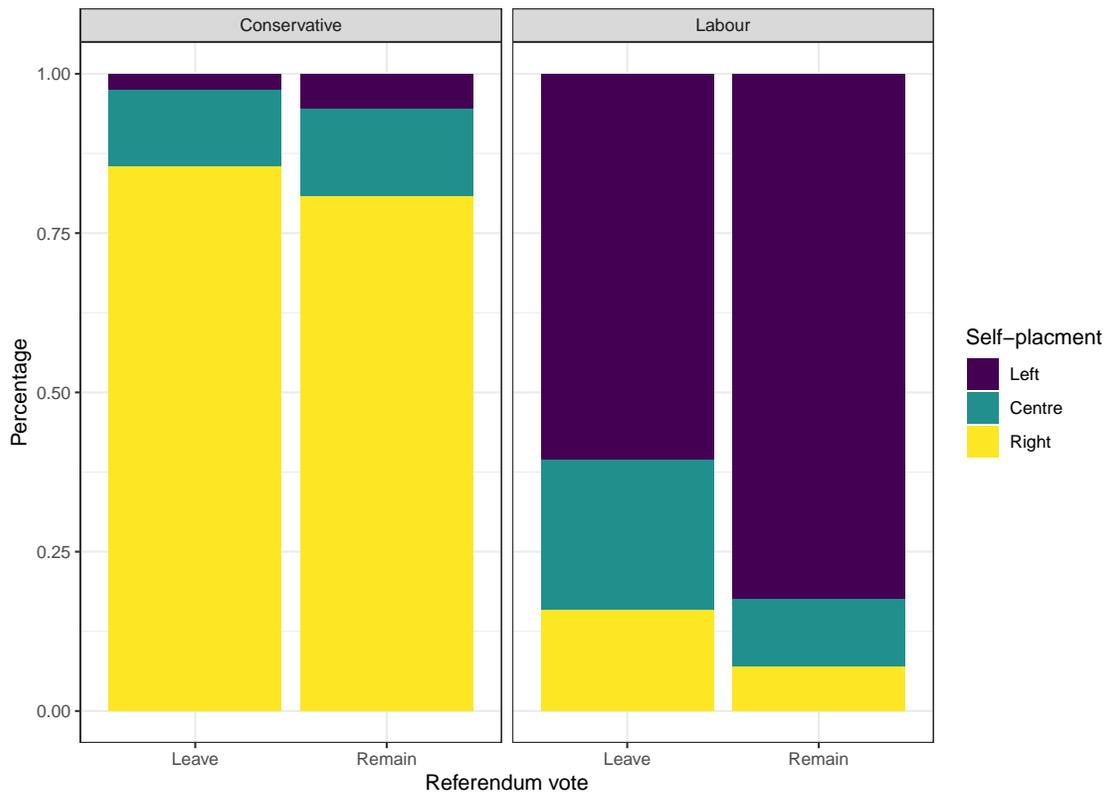


Figure 3.3: Left-Right Identification During the 2015 Election

On average, we would expect Conservative voters to locate themselves on the right of the self-placement scale and Labour voters to identify on the left. Those who feel cross-pressured might identify in the centre. Given the divisions in operational ideology seen above, we might expect Labour voters who would go on to vote Leave to be less likely to identify as left-wing.

Figure 3.3 confirms this expectation. Considering Conservative 2015 voters first, there is very little difference between those who would go on to vote leave and those who would go on to vote Remain. Conservative remainers are slightly less likely to identify as right, and slightly more likely to identify in the centre or even left of the scale. The differences between the two sides of the referendum among 2015 Labour voters are starker, echoing the larger gulf on cultural values. Only 60% of Labour leavers identified as left-wing pre-referendum, compared to 82% of Labour remainers. This leaves 24% of Labour leavers who identified

with the centre and 16% who identified as right-wing despite voting Labour. By 2015 there was a large proportion of more culturally conservative individuals within the Labour party base, who were less likely to identify as left-wing. Yet these individuals, by definition, had still voted Labour in 2015, most likely due to their economic values that were much more aligned with other Labour voters than Conservative voters.

Alongside the analysis of ideology, it may be also be useful to consider how this compares with attachment and identification with the parties themselves.

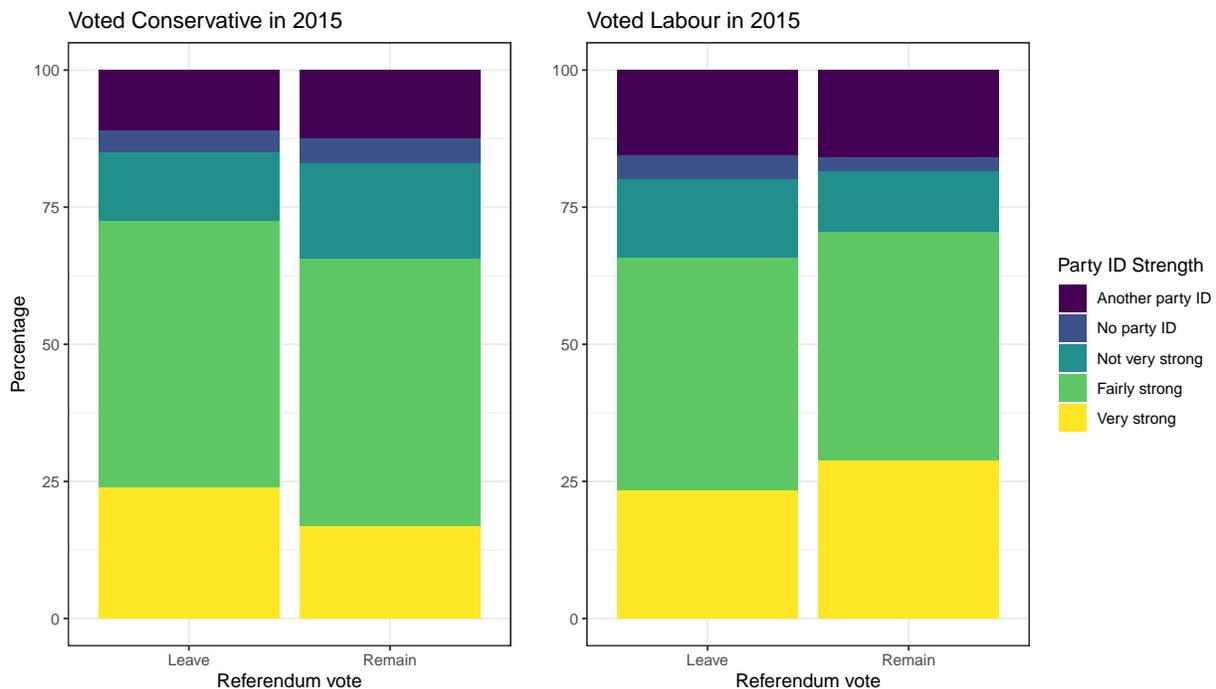


Figure 3.4: Strength of Partisanship in 2015

Figure 3.4 shows the strength of party identification among the 2015 Labour and Conservative voters, again divided by EU referendum vote. Both Conservative leavers and Labour remainers are slightly more likely to identify as 'very' or 'fairly' strong identifiers with their party during the 2015 election than either Conservative remainers or Labour leavers. The asymmetries between the parties no longer appear, however. Despite their being a larger ideological divide within the Labour base, the gap in Labour leavers and Labour remainers identifying strongly with the party is much smaller. In fact, if only partisan attachment had

Table 3.2: Predicting Leave Vote Using 2015 Ideology

	DV: Leave voting in EU Referendum					
	2015 Labour Voters			2015 Conservative Voters		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Intercept	0.47*** (0.02)	0.33*** (0.01)	0.40*** (0.01)	0.59*** (0.02)	0.56*** (0.01)	0.54*** (0.02)
Self-placement: Left	-0.25*** (0.02)		-0.11*** (0.02)	-0.16*** (0.04)		-0.12*** (0.04)
Self-placement: Right	0.01 (0.02)		0.01 (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)		0.04* (0.02)
Economic values		-0.11** (0.04)	-0.19*** (0.04)		0.00 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)
Cultural values		0.94*** (0.03)	0.85*** (0.03)		0.92*** (0.04)	0.90*** (0.04)
R ²	0.06	0.19	0.20	0.01	0.08	0.09
Adj. R ²	0.06	0.19	0.20	0.01	0.08	0.09
Num. obs.	5824	5824	5824	5988	5988	5988

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table presenting the results of a series of linear regression models, predicting a leave vote in the 2016 EU referendum. Data for the predictors come from the 2015 post-election wave of the BESIP. The reference self-placement category is identifying in the centre.

been considered, we would have fewer clues about the divisions within the Labour party that would become more evident later on. This illustrates the advantage of analysing ideology, both symbolic and operational, alongside party votes and attachment.

Finally, I present the results of a series of linear regression models to examine whether (and for whom) ideology in 2015 can predict the leave vote in 2016. The results are presented in Table 3.2. Models 1 to 3 predict leave voting among those who voted Labour in 2015, and Models 4 to 6 predict leave voting among those who voted Conservative in 2015.

The results from the models demonstrate that predictors of leave voting are similar for both Labour and Conservative voters. Models 1 and 4 find that identifying as ‘left’ rather than centre predicts a lower likelihood of voting leave. Equally, greater cultural conservatism predicts leave voting among both Labour and Conservative voters, as seen in models 2 and 4. The coefficient sizes for both parties are similar; it is not that cultural conservatism has a greater ability to predict leave voting among Labour voters. However, the divergence

between the parties that appeared above is reflected in the differential R^2 results between the models of Labour voters and the models of Conservative voters. The R^2 in Model 3 (Labour voters) of 0.2 is more than double the R^2 in Model 6 (Conservative voters). This reflects the proportion of each party's voting base that actually held divergent ideologies. Ideology was much more helpful in predicting leave voting among Labour voters because many Labour leavers held culturally conservative values that put them at odds with their co-partisans. However, there were fewer Conservative voters in 2015 that stood out against their co-partisans. For this reason, ideology is much less helpful for predicting Leave voting among 2015 Conservative voters. As seen earlier in Figure 3.2, even many Conservative remainers held the same culturally conservative values as the leavers in both parties.

This evidence suggests that some divisions along Brexit lines could be observed before the referendum. However, these divisions were much more visible in the Labour party. Ideological divisions among Conservative voters were much less visible before the referendum. This provides initial support for H1: Pre-referendum measures of ideology predict Leave/Remain voting within the Labour coalition, but not the Conservative coalition. The Labour Party base was more divided along EU referendum lines before the referendum.

3.5.2 Post-referendum changes in ideology

I now examine the ideological shifts that occurred in response to the referendum itself. To keep the groups consistent, these analyses continue to divide individuals by their 2015 vote choice and referendum vote in 2016, though inevitably some of these people will have changed their vote or European membership preferences between these time points. However, this strategy allows me to consider how the same groups of individuals have shifted over time.

Figure 3.5 displays the mean self-reported position of individuals their perceptions of the two parties on the left-right scale over time. The plots again are split by 2015 vote choice and EU referendum vote. As noted earlier, in the pre-referendum period, Labour leavers were more likely to place themselves to the centre than Labour remainers. Conservative leavers

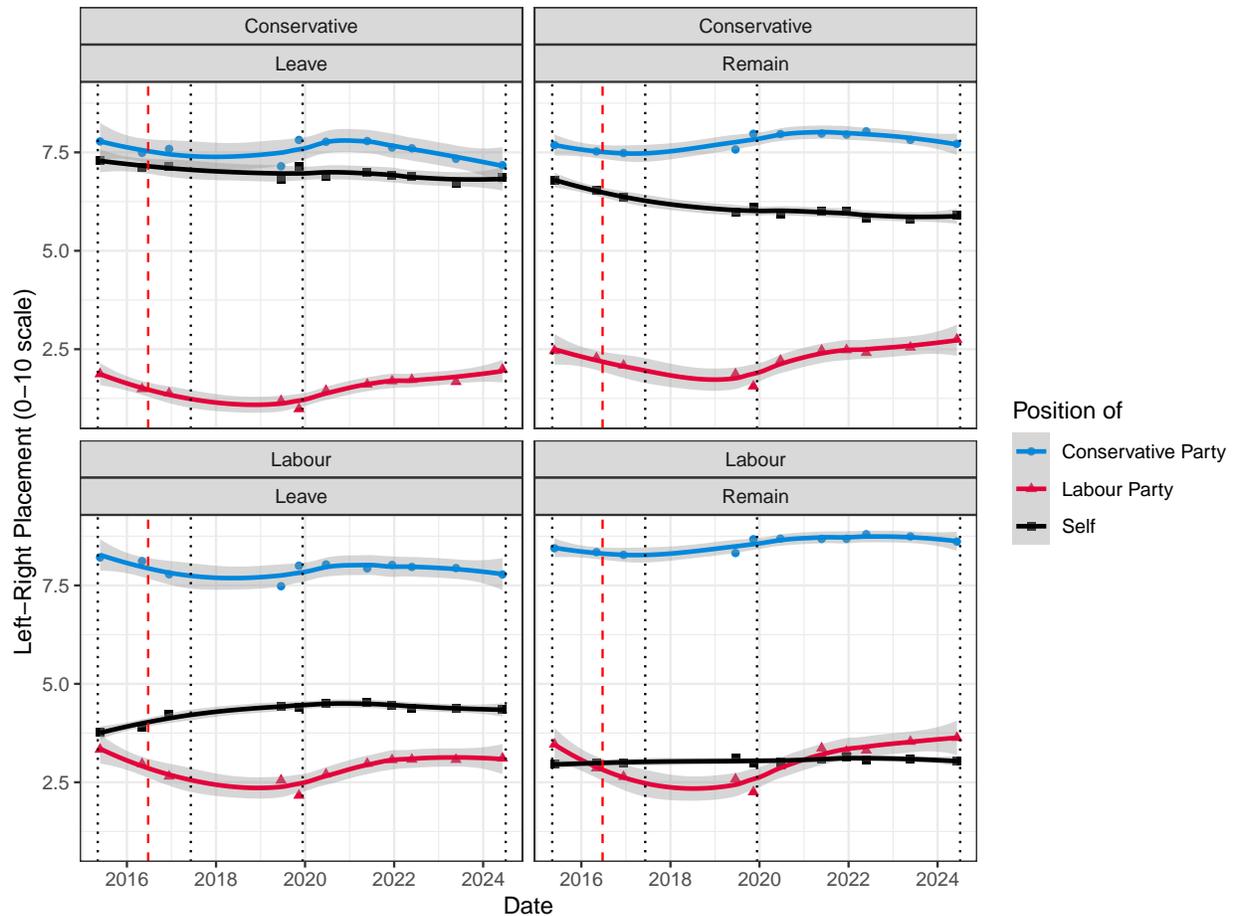


Figure 3.5: Placements of parties and self over time

These plots show how people place parties and themselves over the entire period of the BESIP data, split by their 2015 vote and 2016 referendum vote. Individuals are asked to place themselves and parties on an 11-point left-right scale. The points on the plot are the mean positioning of party/self for each group. The vertical dotted lines represent General Elections, while the red dashed line represents the EU referendum.

and remainers place themselves similarly in the pre-referendum period. All groups begin placing themselves closer to the centre, on average, after the referendum. This movement is stronger and much more visible for the cross-pressured groups (Conservative remainers and Labour leavers). The strongest movement on self-placement is those who voted Conservative in 2015 and remain in 2016.

We can compare these self-placements with how these groups thought about the Conservative and Labour parties in the left-right space. These placements appear responsive

to changes within the party leaderships; all groups note a shift to the left for the Labour party when Jeremy Corbyn becomes its leader after the 2015 election period, and a shift back towards the centre once he is replaced by Keir Starmer after the 2019 election. However, the differences in the judgements about the position of the Conservative party are perhaps more interesting. After the referendum, the Conservative Party, which had been previously been internally divided on EU membership, took a more anti-EU position as they negotiated UK's exit from and withdrawal agreement with the EU. For those who voted 'leave', there seems to be little change in how left/right-wing they observe the Conservative party to be in response to this post-referendum shift in EU position-taking. However remainers within both parties begin to place the Conservatives further to the right by the 2019 election. This might be surprising, given Boris Johnson's focus on "levelling up" in the 2019 General Election.

The results of the combined shifts in party placements is that the distance between party placement and self-placement widens most for Conservative remainers in the period after the referendum. These voters change both how they position themselves and their party in response to the party's embrace of Brexit. This gap narrows again slightly by the May 2023 local elections, as this group begins to view the Conservative party moving back towards the centre under Rishi Sunak's leadership. The gap that grows between Labour leavers' self-placement and their party also increases after the referendum and peaks in the 2019 election. This decreases once Keir Starmer takes over the Labour leadership from Jeremy Corbyn.

While Figure 3.5 shows mean self-placements across the group, it may also be useful to study this variable more closely, and consider the proportion of each group who identify on the left, centre, and right. Conservative remainers had looked similar to their leave counterparts on this measure during the 2015 election. However, Figure 3.6 shows these voters moved away from their right identities in the wake of the referendum. At the time of the 2015 election, 81% of Conservative remainers identified as right-wing, but by May 2023 this was at a low of 55%, increasing only to 58% by the 2024 election. Conservative remainers began to be much less likely to describe themselves as right-wing. The largest decline was in the

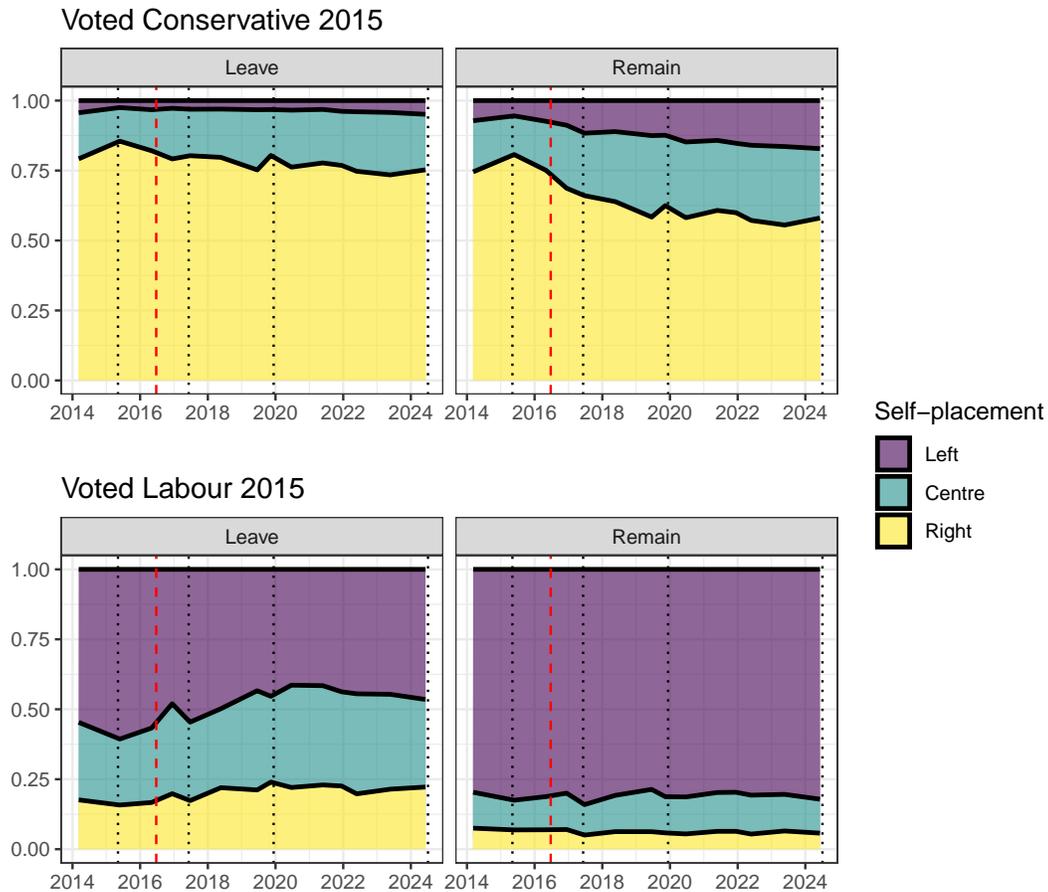


Figure 3.6: Proportions identifying as left or right over time, by EU referendum and 2015 vote

Left-right self-placement has been condensed into three categories from the 0-10 left-right self-placement scale. Each panel shows the changes in left-right self-placement for each group between 2014-2024. The black vertical dotted lines mark the General Elections, and the red vertical dashed line marks the EU referendum.

immediate aftermath of the EU referendum. A similar pattern can be observed for Labour leavers voters becoming less likely to identify as left-wing, though this group had started from a lower likelihood of identifying as left-wing even before the referendum.

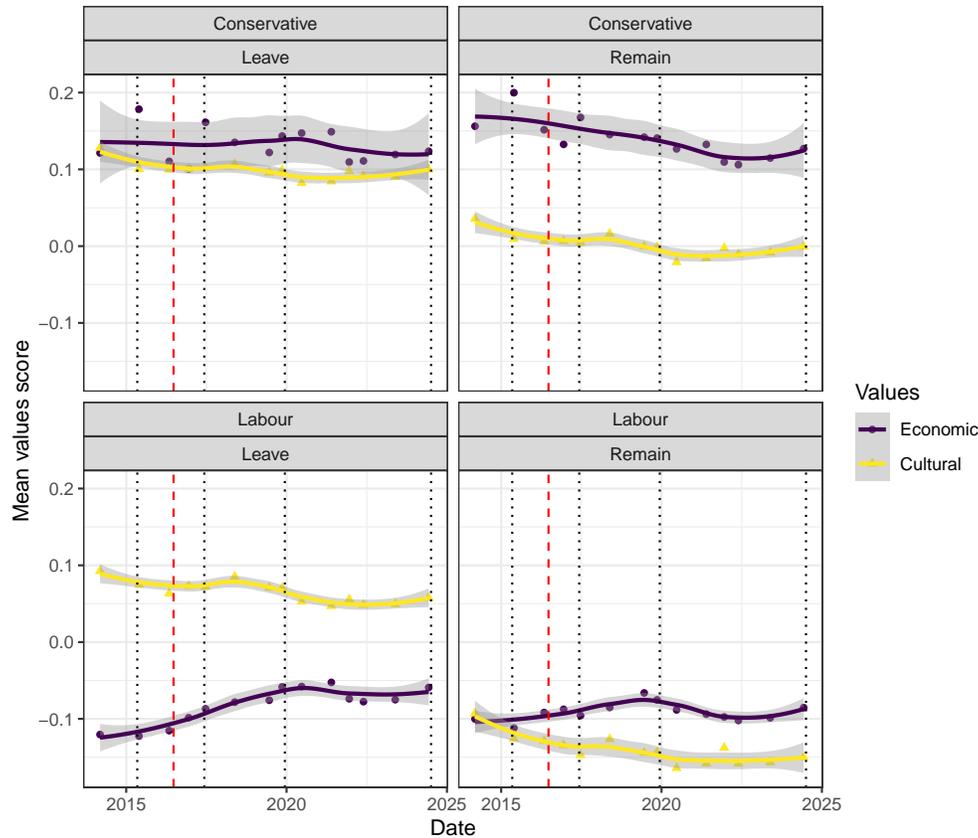


Figure 3.7: Changes in operational ideology over time, by Brexit and 2015 vote

These panels show the changes in mean values for each group between 2014-2024. The black vertical dotted lines mark the General Elections, and the red vertical dashed line marks the EU referendum.

We can also examine how operational ideology shifted during this period. This is presented in Figure 3.7. There was an overall movement across all groups towards cultural liberalism, though this movement is weakest among Conservative leavers. More striking perhaps, is the way that economic values shifted within the cross-pressured groups. Conservative remainers were further to the economic right than conservative leavers during the 2015 election. Given that this group was closer to the centre on social attitudes, it may be expected that right-wing economics were a core value to this group. However, in the wake of the referendum, this group underwent a marked shift towards the economic centre. The referendum shifted not only some in this group away from ‘right’ self-placement, but also encouraged them to operationally become more economically left too.

An equal but opposite pattern can be seen among Labour leavers, who move rightwards towards the economic centre after the referendum. These results suggest that while divisions over Brexit were primarily along cultural lines, the longer-term effect of this new divide may have been to also make people question their economic values or bring them more into alignment with their Brexit identities.

Finally, I examine the extent to which referendum choice predicted whether 2015 Conservative and Labour voters switched their vote choice in the 2017, 2019 and 2024 elections. Of these three, 2019 was predominantly seen as *the* Brexit election, because Labour campaigned to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement and hold a second referendum. Labour's loss of a large number of seats in 2019, predominantly in the 'red wall', proved a striking geographic indicator of a realignment. This narrative from the 2019 election highlighted one of the cross-pressured groups - Labour leavers. In 2024, however, the biggest loser was the Conservative party. Was this indicative of divisions created by the referendum?

Table 3.3 presents the results of a series of models that test how well EU referendum vote predicts whether 2015 Conservative voters stuck with the Conservative party in each subsequent election. The 2017 election has a 17-percentage-point gap by referendum vote. While 91% of 2015 Conservative leavers stuck with their party in 2017, only 74% of remainers did so. In the 2019 General Election this gap grew. The Conservative Party again retained 91% of their 2015 voters who had voted leave. Yet by 2019, only 56% of 2015 Conservative remainers had stuck with the party. Together with the R^2 of 0.16, these results suggest that the referendum was, by 2019, an important factor in whether Conservative voters stayed loyal to the party.

The model of the 2024 General Election tells a different story. By this election, those who had voted leave were only slightly more likely to vote Conservative again than those who had voted remain. The Conservative Party retained only around half their 2015 voters from either side of the referendum divide. The R^2 is also very close 0 - EU referendum vote provides almost no information about why someone would have defected from the Conservative party

Table 3.3: Predicting Conservative voting from referendum vote

	2015 Conservative Voters		
	DV: Voted Conservative 2017	DV: Voted Conservative 2019	DV: Voted Conservative 2024
Intercept	0.91*** (0.00)	0.91*** (0.00)	0.53*** (0.01)
Referendum Vote: Remain	-0.17*** (0.00)	-0.35*** (0.01)	-0.07*** (0.01)
R ²	0.05	0.16	0.01
Adj. R ²	0.05	0.16	0.01
Num. obs.	21021	17403	7663

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Note: These linear regression models test whether EU referendum vote predicts whether 2015 Conservative voters voted for the Conservative Party again in the subsequent general elections in 2017, 2019 and 2024.

or not in 2024. Given the deep unpopularity of the party in 2024, referendum vote choice was in fact a better predictor of who 2015 Conservative voters had abandoned the party for. Around 27% of 2015 Conservative leavers voted for Reform UK in 2024, compared to only 4% of the remainers. Of the Conservative remainers, 22% had turned to Labour, and another 20% had turned to the Liberal Democrats. This compared with just 7.5% of Conservative leavers switching to Labour, and 6% to the Liberal Democrats. The full movements of Conservative 2015 voters to other parties are presented in Figure 3.8 in the appendix. Overall, it appears that the EU referendum contributed to a long-term division in the Conservative Party's pre-referendum base; by 2019, it predicted who would have defected from the Conservative party. By 2024, the referendum divide predicted not whether someone would continue voting Conservative, but which party voters had defected to.

The results for the models of the Labour party base are presented in Table 3.4. Like the models for the Conservative voters, the widest gap between leavers and remainers is in 2019. In 2019, 47% of labour leavers voted for the party again, compared to 78% of labour remainers. In both 2017 and particularly 2019, the R^2 in the Conservative models were greater; referendum vote was more decisive in predicting vote retention among the Conservative vote than the Labour vote. However, by 2024, the referendum was a stronger predictor of vote retention among the Labour base than the Conservatives. As discussed above, this may have been because the Conservative party lost votes on both sides of the

referendum vote. The movements of the Labour 2015 base are also presented in the appendix, in Figure 3.9.

Table 3.4: Predicting Labour voting using referendum vote

	2015 Labour Voters		
	DV: Voted Labour 2017	DV: Voted Labour 2019	DV: Voted Labour 2024
Intercept	0.75*** (0.01)	0.47*** (0.01)	0.54*** (0.01)
Referendum Vote: Remain	0.13*** (0.01)	0.31*** (0.01)	0.21*** (0.01)
R ²	0.03	0.09	0.04
Adj. R ²	0.03	0.09	0.04
Num. obs.	19126	14873	6257

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Overall, the results from tracking ideology and voting over time suggests that divisions along referendum lines were visible within both the Labour and Conservative bases. However, given there was a larger gap on along cultural lines within the Labour party pre-referendum, the drifting of Conservative remainers is perhaps more striking. Over time, Conservatives who voted remain, who had, before the referendum, looked very similar to their leave counterparts, became less likely to identify as right-wing, moved away from cultural conservatism and right-wing economics and became less likely to vote Conservative in 2017 and 2019. By 2024 though, as Reform UK rose in popularity, Conservative leavers were turning away from the Conservative party in similar numbers, just in a different direction. As the party in government throughout the UK's exit from the EU (and the party that began the process) the Conservative Party might face the longest-term impact of the divisions it caused through proposing the EU referendum, losing votes in every direction in 2024. The findings here support H2: Leave/Remain voting predicts post-referendum ideological and voting shifts within the pre-referendum Conservative coalition. In contrast to the already divided Labour Party, The Conservative Party base became more divided along EU referendum lines *after* the referendum.

3.6 Conclusion

This paper highlights how the EU referendum had differential effects on the Labour and Conservative coalitions. The analysis of ideological divisions pre-referendum suggested that the Labour party was more vulnerable to a referendum that made cultural issues more salient. However, in the wake of the referendum, both parties were divided, and remainers departed the Conservative party despite being ideologically aligned with their party pre-referendum.

Whilst there has been much discussion about class dealignment, and particularly the Labour Party's loss of support among the working-classes, the Labour vote base still contained voters who were culturally conservative and economically left by 2015. In fact, Labour leavers were marginally more economically-left than Labour remainers. However, this group of voters were distinct because they were much more culturally conservative than Labour remainers, with cultural attitudes more in line with the Conservative party. This group were also less likely to define themselves as left-wing. Given these ideological distinctions within the Labour Party, their attitudes in 2015 were predictive of leave-voting. By 2024, this divide between Labour leavers and Labour remainers had deepened.

Alternatively, 2015 Conservative voters who would go on to vote remain looked very similar to Conservative leavers. There was little indication in the ideological data before the referendum that this group of voters were at risk of defecting from the party. Yet, after the referendum, this group perceived that the Conservative party had moved to the right, away from them, as the party embraced Brexit. Conservative remainers were less likely to describe themselves as right-wing by the 2019 General Election, and even moved towards the economic centre. Clearly, the EU referendum and the movements of the Conservative leadership in the aftermath were off-putting to this segment of the electorate. By 2024, half of 2015 Conservative remainers abandoned the party for alternatives on the left such as Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party. Notably though, a similar proportion of Conservative leavers had also defected from the party to Reform UK in 2024.

While class dealignment has been noted for decades, the ideological divide that accompanied it, on economic issues, was still important in 2015. However, the latent cultural cleavage was activated by the EU referendum, and both cross-pressured Labour leavers and Conservative remainers moved away from their parties. When assessing realignment separately between the Labour and Conservative basis, it seems that divisions were already visible in the Labour Party before the referendum, but the referendum appeared to create divisions among the Conservative base. For this reason, the story of realignment in the UK largely depends on which party one focuses on.

Whether these changes consist of a ‘realignment’ or simply a dealignment is dependent on how linkages between parties and voters last longer-term. While class-based dealignment has a long history, it might finally convert to a realignment if the linkages between cultural values (largely correlated with age and education) and partisanship remain strong, and whether new traditional bases for each major party will replace the class-based alignment. Another realignment possibility is that either (or both) of the Conservative or Labour parties is replaced in the system of party competition. At the time of writing, Reform UK is polling better than both parties. This suggests the process of change may still be in progress.

Appendix 3.A Logistic Models

Table 3.5: Predicting Leave Vote Using 2015 Ideology, Logistic Regression

	2015 Labour Voters			2015 Conservative Voters		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Intercept	-0.12 (0.07)	-0.86*** (0.04)	-0.53*** (0.08)	0.36*** (0.08)	0.25*** (0.04)	0.15 (0.08)
Self-placement: Left	-1.16*** (0.08)		-0.54*** (0.09)	-0.63*** (0.16)		-0.53** (0.17)
Self-placement: Right	0.04 (0.11)		0.04 (0.12)	0.17* (0.08)		0.18* (0.09)
Economic values		-0.32 (0.22)	-0.73** (0.23)		-0.00 (0.16)	-0.16 (0.16)
Cultural values		5.57*** (0.18)	5.16*** (0.19)		4.10*** (0.19)	4.03*** (0.19)
AIC	6572.77	5696.44	5647.43	7939.44	7463.04	7442.68
BIC	6592.78	5716.45	5680.78	7959.53	7483.13	7476.17
Log Likelihood	-3283.39	-2845.22	-2818.72	-3966.72	-3728.52	-3716.34
Deviance	6566.77	5690.44	5637.43	7933.44	7457.04	7432.68
Num. obs.	5824	5824	5824	5988	5988	5988

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 3.6: Predicting Conservative vote from referendum vote, logistic model

	2015 Conservative Voters		
	DV: Voted Conservative 2017	DV: Voted Conservative 2019	DV: Voted Conservative 2024
Intercept	2.34*** (0.03)	2.36*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.03)
Referendum Vote: Remain	-1.28*** (0.04)	-2.09*** (0.04)	-0.30*** (0.05)
AIC	17043.62	15546.62	10586.00
BIC	17059.52	15562.15	10599.89
Log Likelihood	-8519.81	-7771.31	-5291.00
Deviance	17039.62	15542.62	10582.00
Num. obs.	21021	17403	7663

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 3.7: Predicting Labour vote from referendum vote, logistic model

	2015 Labour Voters		
	DV: Voted Labour 2017	DV: Voted Labour 2019	DV: Voted Labour 2024
Intercept	1.08*** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.03)	0.17*** (0.05)
Referendum Vote: Remain	0.91*** (0.04)	1.40*** (0.04)	0.95*** (0.06)
AIC	16101.18	16876.23	7447.57
BIC	16116.90	16891.44	7461.05
Log Likelihood	-8048.59	-8436.11	-3721.78
Deviance	16097.18	16872.23	7443.57
Num. obs.	19126	14873	6257

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Appendix 3.B Vote movements across general elections

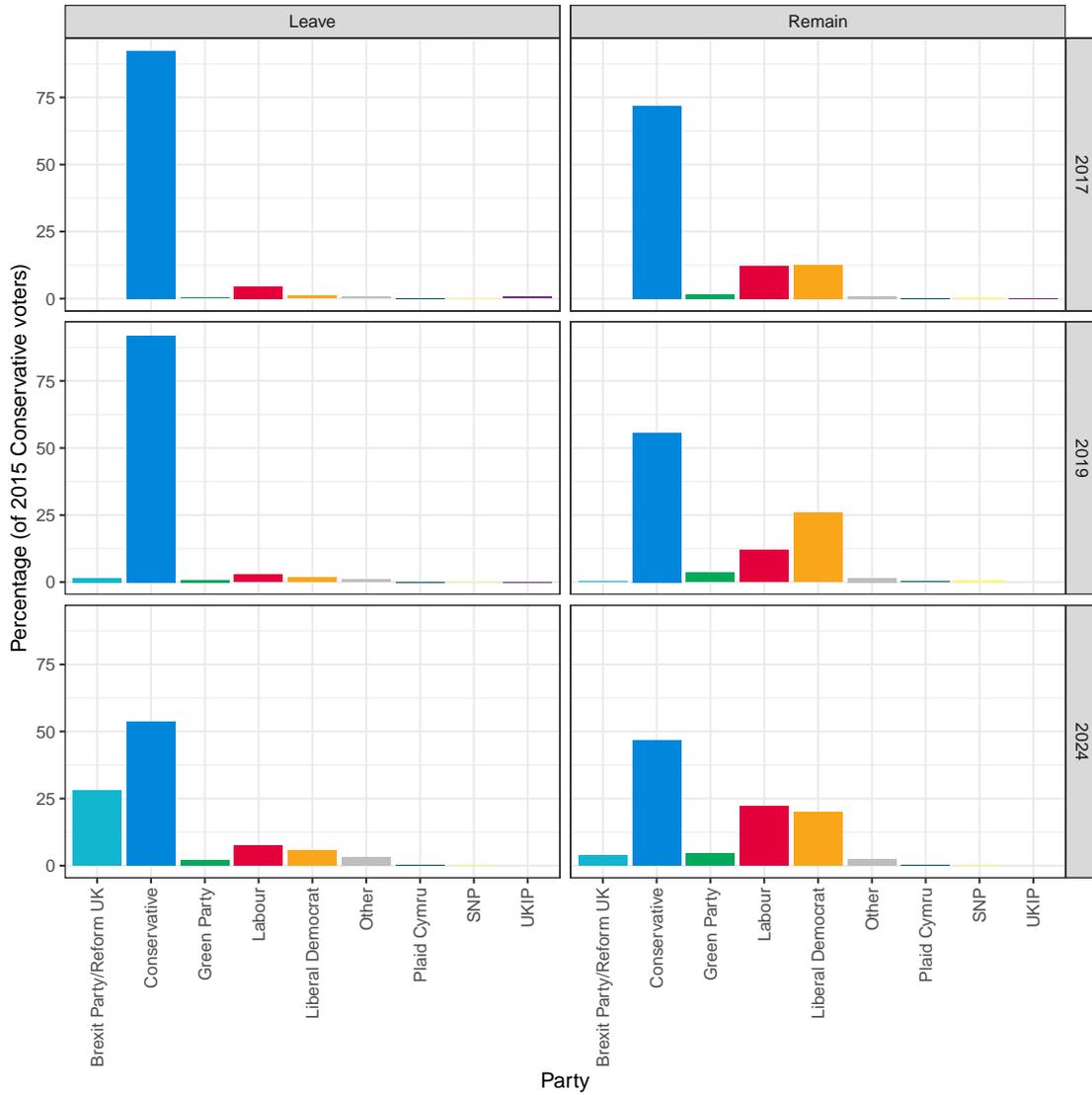


Figure 3.8: Voter flows from 2015 Conservative voters

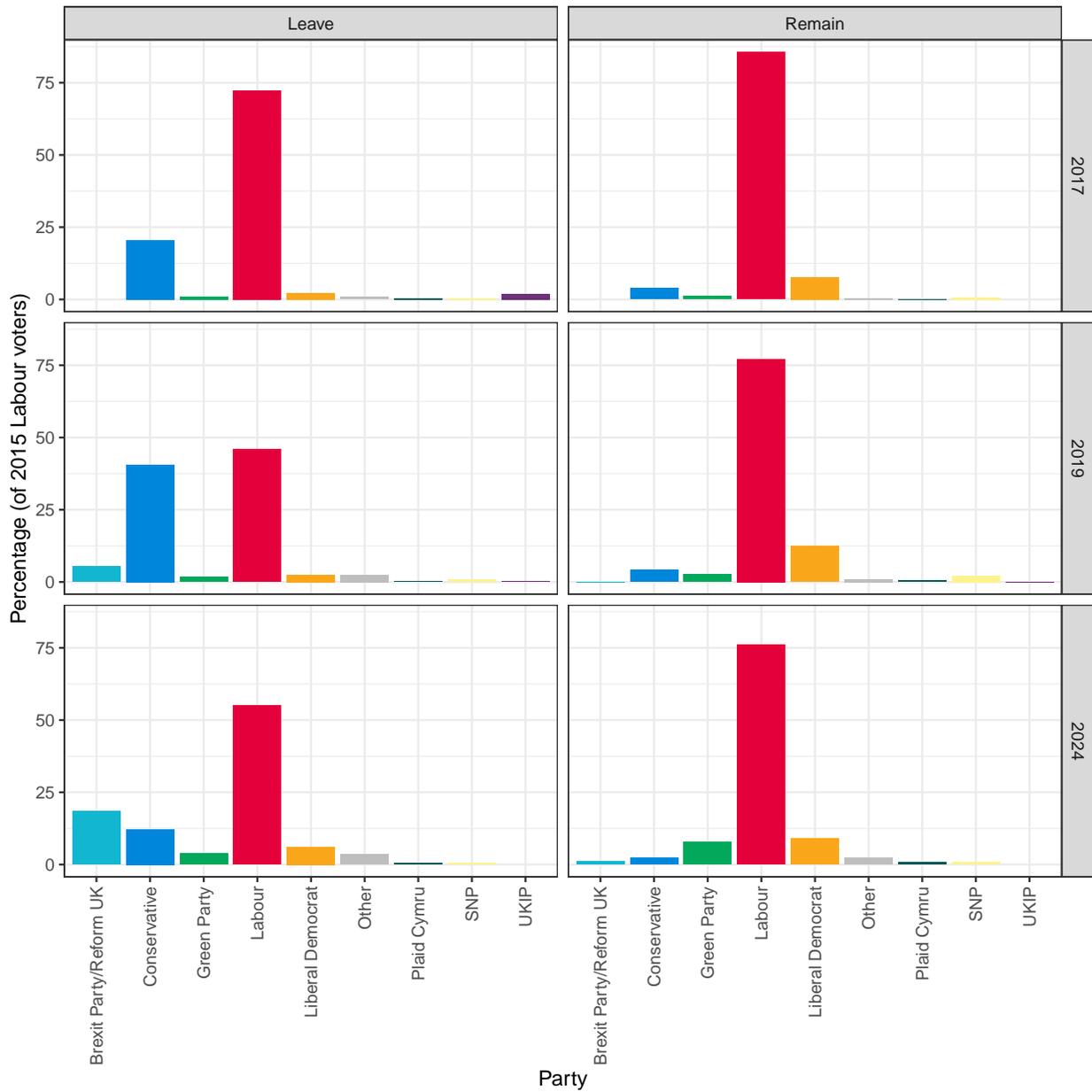


Figure 3.9: Voter flows from 2015 Labour voters

Chapter 4

The Impact of Dimensional Salience on Left-Right Self-placement

Abstract

How does the salience of an issue dimension impact left-right self-placement? This study uses an original survey experiment in the UK to explore whether priming either the economic or cultural dimension of politics and linking it to the left-right space impacts where someone places themselves on the left-right self-placement scale. I find that priming on the cultural dimension leads respondents to choose a left-right self-placement more aligned with their cultural values than the control group. Alternatively, there is little impact of priming the economic dimension. These findings suggest that raising the salience of cultural issues and their connection with the left-right space can impact someone's positioning of themselves on the left-right spectrum, while raising the salience of the economic dimension may be less impactful.

4.1 Introduction

Competition in the political space is increasingly organised around issues on the cultural dimension, and issues on the economic dimension are becoming less influential (Kriesi et al., 2006; Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013). Whilst it is possible that cultural considerations would replace usage of 'left-right' terminology, it is also possible that people may integrate cultural issues into their conception of the left-right space. Studies have demonstrated this

shift in the meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’ among parties (Kriesi et al., 2006) and voter perceptions of parties (Dassonneville, Hooghe and Marks, 2024). This shift has also affected people’s conceptions of their own position as Left-right self-placement is also increasingly correlated with cultural divisions (Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013). This is particularly true for those on the right side of the spectrum (Lachat, 2018). Nevertheless it has been more difficult to identify the mechanism driving this movement. In longitudinal studies, this change has been assumed to be due to changes in the salience of issues, but it has proven challenging to measure individual-level issue importance (Wlezien, 2005).

Previous scholarship suggests the salience of issues can impact a range of political behaviours and opinions, such as voting, or how people perceive the positions of parties (Giger and Lefkofridi, 2014; van der Brug, 2004). It seems logical that if voters are increasingly exposed to information about and disagreements on a new dimension of issues, this would lead them to place more weight on that dimension when reporting their left-right self-placement. For example, as voters are exposed more frequently to issues on the cultural dimension, their left-right self-placement may increasingly align with their cultural values, potentially at the expense of alignment with economic values. To address this, I test whether priming respondents to link the economic or cultural dimension with the left-right space changes how voters report their own left-right position in the political space.

In this study I use a pre-registered survey experiment to examine whether priming individuals to think about the economic or cultural dimension of politics in the left-right space impacts their left-right self-placement compared with a control group. That is, do those who are primed on the economic (or cultural) dimension in the left-right space then choose a left-right self-placement that is more heavily influenced by their economic (or cultural) values? I find that priming on the cultural dimension does lead to a greater alignment between left-right self-placement and cultural values, compared with a control group. This effect, however, is not found for priming economic values. The group primed with issues on the economic dimension were no more likely to have a self-placement that aligned with their

economic values than the control group.

The findings of this paper therefore demonstrate a differential impact of priming on the economic dimension to priming on the cultural dimension. This paper suggests that raising the salience of the cultural dimension may be more impactful than raising the salience of the economic dimension on left-right self-placement. It may be that voters are already so aware of links between the economic dimension with the left-right space that priming has little effect. Yet even with the increased salience of cultural issues in 2025 it still appears possible to prime people on how cultural values align with conceptions of ‘left’ and ‘right’.

This paper proceeds as follows. I firstly outline the research into left-right self-placement and the impacts of changing issue salience. I then outline the survey experimental design. Next I analyse the results using pre-registered hypotheses, and investigate possible explanations for the difference in results for the two issue primes. Finally, I discuss the implication of this study and the potential for further research.

4.2 The Dynamic Nature of the Left-Right Space

The conception of the political space as divided into the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ is a prominent feature of political science (Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1981). This is particularly found in studies of party politics and public opinion that rely on the idea of ‘space’ and ‘distance’ to help us understand political systems. The idea of a ‘median voter’ that parties should appeal to, for example, only makes sense in a spatial conception of politics, where parties and voters can both be placed and positions compared. Equally, the literature on the congruence between parties and their voters relies on a spatial understanding of political competition (Giger and Lefkofridi, 2014; Huber and Powell, 1994; McDonald and Budge, 2005). When this is measured in one-dimension, the space is almost always divided into ‘left’ and ‘right’ in the UK. Whilst we increasingly consider party positions in multi-dimensional spaces, the summative unidimensional scale of ‘left’ and ‘right’ is still useful, especially as

it reduces the complexity of political competition for voters. For this reason, much survey research in political science still asks people to place themselves on a scale of ‘left’ and ‘right’.

There has been considerable debate about the ideological basis of voters’ left-right self-placement. From one perspective, its usefulness is limited if the public lacks sufficiently coherent political ideologies for the labels of ‘left’ and ‘right’ to be meaningful (Converse, 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017). Yet, others argue that proponents of the ‘end of ideology’ hypothesis were too quick to dismiss the study of ideology among the mass public, as many studies show the relationship between left-right self-placement and other political attitudes and behaviours, such as partisanship and political values (Jahn, 2023; Jost, 2006; 2021). Whether left-right self-placements reflect a coherent set of political attitudes is unclear, particularly in an era where more than one issue dimension appear to be relevant, and where positions across dimensions are seemingly uncorrelated. This is why some authors call for studies of left-right ideology to consider more than one dimension of attitudes (Feldman and Johnston, 2014). In this way, we can compare symbolic measures of ideology, such as left-right self-placement, with multiple dimensions of operational ideology, such as values on the economic or cultural dimension (Ellis and Stimson, 2012).

Historically, the economic dimension has been the one most aligned with left-right self-placement, yet a new dimension has become increasingly significant (De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013). The ‘new’ dimension of politics will be referred to as the ‘cultural’ dimension in this paper, though has been variously described as the GAL-TAN (Green-Alternative-Libertarian Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) dimension (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson, 2002), a social dimension, or even a divide between the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalisation (Kriesi et al., 2006). It includes political conflict over issues such as multiculturalism, immigration, civil rights, gender and environmental policy. It is generally considered a separate dimension of politics from economic issues as positions on the economic dimension are often largely uncorrelated with positions on the cultural dimension.

The ambiguity of the relationship between these two dimensions can be seen through a

global study of the concepts. In some cases, such as Western Europe, the economic left is generally associated with liberalism, yet in other parts of the world left economic values are more likely to be linked with cultural conservatism (Malka, Lelkes and Soto, 2019). Even within Western Europe, whilst party systems generally contain parties holding liberal-left or conservative-right views, there are large numbers of voters who combine left-economic views with culturally conservative values (Hillen and Steiner, 2020; van der Brug and van Spanje, 2009). Values on the cultural dimension are increasingly central to voting behaviour (Fieldhouse et al., 2023). Studies of recent elections in Europe demonstrate that voting is now better predicted by positioning on cultural rather than economic preferences (Dassonneville, Hooghe and Marks, 2024). Reciprocally, parties now seem to be more responsive to voter-level shifts on the cultural dimension (Dassonneville et al., 2024).

As cultural issues become increasingly prominent, they could plausibly be seen as replacing ‘left-right’ political competition. However, the meaning of left-right terminology is dynamic, and could expand to encompass cultural divisions (Jahn, 2023). De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee (2013) use data from the Netherlands to show that for voters, left-right terminology has transformed from representing mostly economic divisions to subsume the cultural dimension. Since economic values are frequently unaligned with cultural values, this also means that economic attitudes have become less predictive of left-right self-placement. The authors attribute this change over time to the mobilisation of anti-immigration attitudes. However, this mechanism is not directly measured.

In Chapter 2 I demonstrated that this change is also underway in Great Britain. Increasingly, left-right self-placement seems better predicted by cultural, rather than economic values. However, this did not seem to correlate with issue importance over time. In 2019, cultural values became more predictive of self-placement when the cultural issue of Brexit was the most frequently given most important issue. This was not reversed when the economic issue of ‘cost of living’ was most important during the 2024 General Election, at the same time as economic values correlated less with left-right self-placement.

For these reasons, a study is required that isolates the impact of dimensional salience on the usage of the left-right self-placement scale. This can help test the causal impact of issue salience, and clear linkages between each issue dimension and the left-right space, on left-right self-placement. If voters are primed to think about one issue dimension, especially explicitly in the context of the left-right space, are they more likely to choose a left-right self-placement which aligns with their values on this dimension?

4.3 Issue salience and issue importance

The concept of issue salience has been defined and measured in several different ways (Denison, 2019; Miller, Krosnick and Fabrigar, 2016; Moniz and Wlezien, 2020). While ‘salience’ is often used interchangeably with individual-level issue importance, I use a broader definition of salience as predominantly used in the survey psychology literature; in Zaller’s RAS model of public opinion (Zaller, 1992), an issue is salient to voters if it is prominent in their mind when they consider a related topic. This aligns with definitions of salience in social psychology. A salient topic is one that is easily accessible to individuals or “top of the mind”, perhaps due to recent exposure (Taylor and Fiske, 1978). It is useful to separate the concepts of salience and individual-level issue importance because an issue does not have to be personally important to someone in order to be salient. For example, during the EU referendum, the issue of Europe was widely discussed and therefore a highly accessible issue to voters, even if it was not personally important to them.

While salience and issue importance can be separated as concepts, they are highly correlated with one another - people may pay more attention to issues that are important to them, and that issue may be more salient in their consideration of other topics. Equally, if a topic is prominently featured in the news, and salient and accessible to voters, it is more likely to become important to them (Iyengar, Peters and Kinder, 1982). Media prominence is therefore an important related concept because it may make an issue more salient and it

then may become more important to voters.

Issue importance has been associated with many other political attitudes and behaviours. For example, congruence between voters and parties is greater for issues that are important to voters (Giger and Lefkofridi, 2014). The issue priorities of voters have been found to both influence and be influenced by party support (Neundorf and Adams, 2018). Equally, people are less convinced by parties that take ambiguous positions on issues that are important to them (Kamphorst, 2024).

One strand of research that has received substantial attention is the link between issue importance and the accuracy of voters' information about party positions. Voters have been found to have more accurate perceptions of party positions on issues that are important to them (Walgrave and Lefevre, 2013). They are also more likely to notice party shifts on important issues (Plescia and Staniek, 2017). This effect may be somewhat limited because other research has found that whilst voters' accuracy of perceived party positions increases for issues that are somewhat important to them, for the issues that are most important, accuracy of perceptions party position decreases somewhat (Somer-Topcu, Fournier and Dassonneville, 2025). If issue importance has an impact on where people perceive parties in the left-right space, it seems likely that the salience of an issue dimension also impacts how people perceive themselves in the left-right space relative to parties.

One of the difficulties of researching individual-level issue importance as a mechanism is that it is difficult to measure (Wlezien, 2005). Investigations into the 'Most Important Issue' (MII) question suggest that, even though it is measured at the individual level, it is better at capturing important attitudes at a mass level rather than individually (Bartle and Laycock, 2012; Johns, 2010). In a study of British voters in 2005, people did not seem particularly more knowledgeable about issues that they reported as important, and it did not seem to influence voting behaviour (Johns, 2010). Thus, even when measured at an individual-level, there are difficulties in using the MII question as a mechanism for individual-level behaviour. These problems do not seem to be specific to any one formulation of the most important

issue question, as multiple versions of the question reveal these same issues (Jennings and Wlezien, 2011). Another issue with assessing the impact of issue importance on vote choice is that it depends on the party system and party choices offered to voters (Ansolabehere and Puy, 2018). There may be issues in measuring the effect of issue importance on vote choice if voters deem an issue as very important but there is no party which represents their views on that issue. Given the difficulties of measuring individual-level issue importance, it is equally difficult to measure its effect on left-right self-placement. This is another reason why using a broader definition of salience may be helpful.

4.4 Drivers of dimensional salience

If we define dimensional salience as the dimension that is ‘top of the mind’ for voters, what drives changes in dimensional salience to voters? One way is through external shocks to the political environment (Fieldhouse et al., 2023). For example, economic crises can raise the salience of the economy while corruption crises or terrorist attacks can lower the salience of the economic dimension (Singer, 2011). Increasing immigration can raise the salience of the issue and support for anti-immigration parties (Dennison and Geddes, 2019; Jin, 2025). Another driver of issue salience is media coverage of issues. Other things being equal, issues that are covered more by the media will inherently be more accessible to voters (Althaus and Kim, 2006; Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Feldman and Sigelman, 1985; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters and Kinder, 1982). An issue dimension may become more salient because single-issue parties emerge and draw attention to a particular issue (Green and Hobolt, 2008; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; Meguid, 2005). Alternatively, an existing party may make the issue central to an election campaign (van der Brug, 2004; van der Brug and van Spanje, 2009; Weaver, 1991).

If the relationship between operational ideology and left-right self-placement is to shift, it is not just necessary for an issue dimension to be salient. There must also be increased

salience of the linkages between that dimension and the left-right space. For example, while issues such as civil rights and race were highly salient during the period under which Converse studied political ideology (Converse, 1964), this did not mean voters were able to summarise their attitudes on this issue into a coherent ideology. Equally, in British politics, immigration has been highly salient at multiple periods in the twentieth century as a result of waves of immigration to the UK. This did not necessarily mean voters included it into their conception of the left-right space, perhaps because the positions of the Conservative and Labour party on the issue were unclear (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). It is not only the issue that needs to be salient to voters, but also the linkages between the issue dimension and the left-right space.

There are many ways this linkage between an issue dimension and the left-right space may be made salient to voters - of course, parties rarely describe themselves or their positions explicitly as left- or right-wing (Scarborough, 1984). However, if existing parties - that voters associate with the left or right already - adopt positions on the new dimension, this will work as a heuristic as to how the new dimension fits into the left-right space (Budge, 1983; Carmines and Stimson, 1986). British voters are generally able to place themselves and parties in the left-right space, and their understanding of this seems responsive to events such as changes in party leadership (Evans and Tilley, 2017; Fieldhouse et al., 2019). This paper does not examine how exactly this linkage is made salient to voters, but instead assesses how making this linkage between latent ideological dimensions and the left-right space salient impacts reported left-right self-placement.

4.5 Priming

In Zaller's 1992 framework of public opinion, people hold different attitudes towards different aspects of issues. Their responses to these issues depend on the ideas most immediately salient to them (Zaller, 1992). Zaller describes priming as a type of "salience effect". Priming adjusts

the immediately salient ideas that people rely on when thinking about an issue (Taylor and Fiske, 1978; Zaller, 1992). In this paper, the test will be whether priming one dimension of political conflict and linking it to the left-right space will impact how people think about their own position in the left-right space.

The priming instrument in the survey is a set of questions on either the economic or cultural dimension, rather than the presentation of information. For this reason, the effect may be similar to those in studies that employ question order experiments. Question order experiments have shown that respondents will answer questions differently depending on the questions they have been asked about previously (Tourangeau et al., 1989). The evidence from both question order experiments and priming effects more widely is that priming effects are only relevant in areas where respondents hold multiple considerations about an item. Strong beliefs are unlikely to be affected by priming experiments (Tourangeau et al., 1989; Zaller, 1992).

Previous research has observed the changing relationship between left-right self-placement and operational ideology over time (De Vries, Hakhverdian and Lancee, 2013; Jahn, 2023). Nevertheless, they not directly measure how linkages between issue dimensions and the left-right space impacted left-right self-placement. Priming experiments have however been used to show the differential item functioning of the left-right self-placement question between counties (Lin and Lee, 2024). Another study that tested the effect of priming respondents on the economic versus the cultural dimension found that those primed by issues on the cultural dimension expressed more distrust in political opponents (Gidron et al., 2025). This supported the proposition that disagreements on the cultural dimension are more closely related with polarisation (Gidron, Adams and Horne, 2023; Harteveld, 2021). This paper will similarly compare priming the economic versus cultural dimension, to assess how this impacts people's own position on the left-right self-placement scale.

4.6 Hypotheses

Using a survey experiment to test the impact of dimensional salience on left-right self-placement avoids both the problems raised by the MII question and the complications imposed by different party systems. It also allows me to directly measure the impact of priming on the linkages between left-right terminology and each value dimension on the extent to which values on the relevant dimension are aligned with left-right self-placement.

The pre-registered hypotheses I investigate are stated formally below:

H1: Priming respondents on the link between policies on the economic dimension and the left-right space will lead them to choose a self-placement level more in line with their economic values (versus control condition).

H2: Priming respondents on the link between policies on the liberal-authoritarian dimension will lead them to choose a self-placement more in line with their liberal-authoritarian values (versus control condition).

4.7 Research design

In this study, I test whether increasing the salience of an issue dimension and linking it to the left-right space means that respondents will choose a left-right self-placement more aligned with their values on that dimension. I use a survey experiment that compares a control group with two treatment groups who are primed to think about either the economic or cultural dimension in the left-right space. The outcome of interest is the interaction effect between values and treatment group on the dependent variable left-right self-placement. I expect that the treatment group that is cued to think about the economic dimension will choose a left-right self-placement that is closer to their economic values (compared to the control group), and that the treatment group that is cued to think about the cultural dimension will choose a left-right self-placement that is closer to their cultural values (compared to the

control group). Since we know many voters hold values that would typically align with the left on one dimension, and with the right on the other, it may also be that priming the economic dimension reduces the correlation between cultural values and self-placement, and vice versa.

4.7.1 Sample

The recruitment process for this experiment was via the online portal Prolific, where participants were paid £1.50 to complete a survey that on average took just under five minutes to complete. To participate, users needed to live in Great Britain and be eligible to vote in UK elections. From this sampling frame, 949 participants were recruited in on the 20th and 21st May 2025. Of these, 7 were removed due to missing demographic data, leaving 942 respondents in the study. Participants were selected to match the proportion of non-voters and voters for each party in the UK 2024 General Election. This meant 40% of the sample was made up of those who didn't vote in 2024, 22% who had voted Labour, 15% Conservative, 8% Liberal Democrat, 9% Reform, 4% Green, and 1% who had voted SNP in 2024. The sample was balanced on gender, but was younger and had higher education levels than the UK average. None of the respondents were removed for failing both attention check questions. A demographic comparison with the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) sample can be found in the appendix for this chapter, in Table 4.2 as BESIP is a comparable survey often used for analysis of British political attitudes. On average the participants in my survey experiment were younger and more likely to have a degree than the BESIP sample. The participants in the survey experiment also, on average, paid less attention to politics than the BESIP sample, and were more likely to belong to an ethnic minority group.

4.7.2 Experiment overview

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups; the control group, the economic treatment group, and the cultural treatment group. All respondents first answered questions on their values on the economic and cultural dimension. They then received the questions assigned to their treatment group. Next they were asked to place themselves on the left-right scale. They were then asked two open-text questions that could be used as a manipulation check, to check whether the treatments worked as intended and effectively primed voters to associate an issue dimension with the left-right terminology. These questions were “What do you think of when you hear the term ‘right-wing’?” and “What do you think of when you hear the term ‘left-wing’?”. Finally, respondents were asked two attention check questions.

4.7.3 Values questions

At the start of the survey, respondents answered six questions on their economic values, and six questions on their values on the cultural dimension. These questions are based on the British Election Study post-election survey (Fieldhouse et al., 2025), and are included in the Appendix. They were created to tap into separate economic and liberal-authoritarian dimensions of ideology (Heath, Evans and Martin, 1994). The questions I use to create the cultural dimension are closely related to common psychological measurements of authoritarianism, including questions on child rearing and the death penalty. However, these questions are closely correlated with the cultural dimension, such as attitudes towards immigration (Vasilopoulos and Robinson, 2025). They are also less likely to act as a prime themselves than a question on immigration, which is important in the present study. Responses to these questions are recorded as ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ to each of the statements. The order of in which the set of values questions appeared first was randomised.

The responses on these questions are separately scaled using Blackbox scaling (Poole et al., 2016), a scaling method designed to recover orthogonal latent ideological dimensions

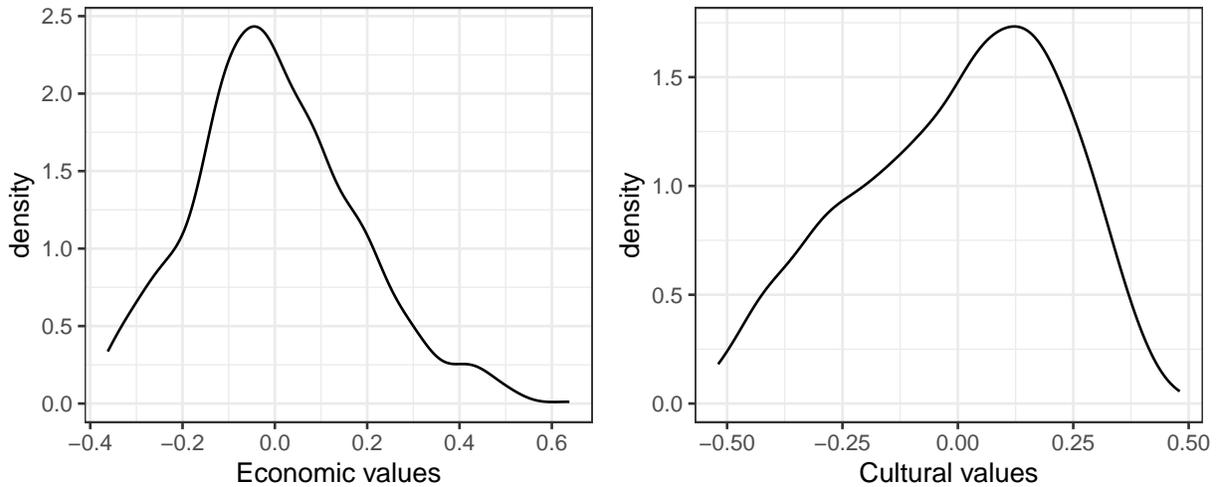


Figure 4.1: Densities of economic and cultural values

underlying ordinal choice data (Poole, 1998). It converts the six economic questions into one score on economic values, and the six cultural questions into one score on cultural values for each individual. The results of this scaling, and the weightings for each question, are laid out in the Appendix.

The scaling of the values question gave each respondent a score on economic values and a score on cultural values that could be used to model the relationship with self-placement. The mean of these scores is 0. The scores were then rescaled so that they had a range of 1, to make the interpretation and comparison between variables easier. The correlation between the two scales was 0.35. The distributions of the values scales are presented in Figure 4.1. Just as in the British Election Study, the economic scale is skewed to the left, and the cultural scale is skewed to the culturally conservative side.

4.7.4 Treatment

During the middle (treatment) section of the survey, the control group were asked some non-political filler questions about how they listen to music and watch television, designed to ensure that there was a similar time gap to the treatment groups from when someone answered the values questions to when they answered the left-right self-placement question.

The treatment groups were primed by a set of questions rather than a presentation of information. This ensured that the results of receiving the treatment would not be the result of an informational effect (Jenkins, 2002). That is, priming only with survey questions does not provide respondents with any new information about political issues or how they fit into the left-right dimension. Instead, any change in left-right self-placement should be a consequence of a priming effect of prompting someone to think about the relevant issue dimension and relying on information they already hold about how these issues map onto the left-right space. The set of questions consisted of three questions each on three policy areas (nine questions overall). For each policy area, respondents were asked to place themselves, and to think about where ‘the average left-wing person’ and the ‘average right-wing person’ would place themselves. This priming encouraged respondents to not only think about their own policy position, but explicitly linked the policy with the left-right space.

To choose the relevant questions to prime respondents, I chose policy questions from the British Election Study that were highly correlated with the relevant values scale. For the economic treatment group, the policies asked about were whether the government should make incomes more equal, whether the government should increase or decrease regulation, and whether cuts to public spending have gone too far or not far enough. For the cultural treatment group, they were asked about immigration, equal opportunities for black and Asian people in the UK, and a question about terrorism and civil liberties. A full list of the treatment questions is provided in the appendix. An example screenshot is included in Figure 4.2 below.

The questions asked in this section were for treatment purposes only, and responses are not used in the main analysis of the treatment effect. However, an investigation of responses is used as a manipulation check to ensure these questions primed the relevant dimension and to assess the extent to which respondents were aware of the left-right dimension of the policy.

Some people think that the UK should allow **many more** immigrants to come to the UK to live and others think that the UK should allow **many fewer** immigrants. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

Many more 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Many fewer



And what do you think the average **left-wing person** would think about immigration? Would they think we should allow **many more** immigrants or **many fewer**?

Many more 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Many fewer



And what do you think the average **right-wing person** would think about immigration? Would they think we should allow **many more** immigrants or **many fewer**?

Many more 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Many fewer

Figure 4.2: Screenshot of the three immigration questions (within the cultural treatment)

4.7.5 Left-right self-placement

The dependent variable in this study was someone’s left-right self-placement on a scale of 0 (Left) - 10 (Right). This is recorded at the end of the survey, after the treatment implementation. The distribution of responses is displayed below in Figure 4.3. There is a concentration of responses at the mid-point, as is common with this question, and may be higher due to the 40% of non-voters included in the study. The mean of the scale is just left of the mid-point at 4.8.

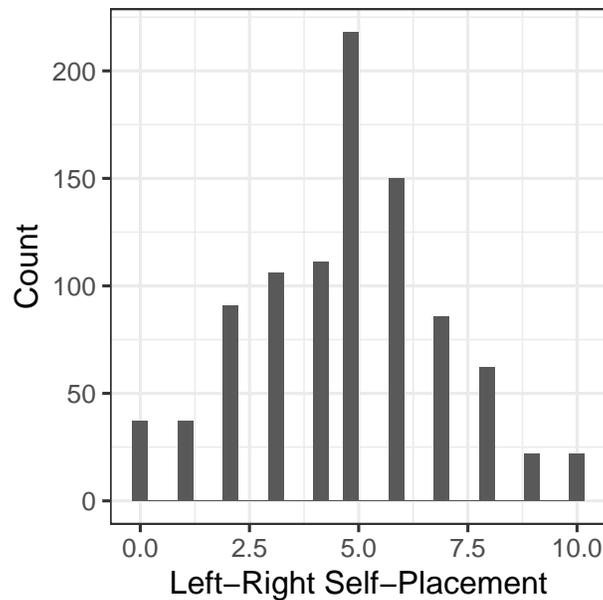


Figure 4.3: Distribution of left-right self-placements in the sample

4.7.6 Control variables

I also include control variables of self-reported political attention, age, education, and party voted for in the 2024 General Election (including non-voting as a category in this variable).

4.7.7 Manipulation checks

I also included two questions after recording left-right self-placement to act as manipulation checks. These questions were ‘What do you think of when you hear the term left-wing?’

and ‘What do you think of when you hear the term right-wing?’. Responses are recorded in open-text format. These questions allow me to explore whether receiving the economic or cultural questions impacts how people think about the terminology of left-wing and right-wing, outside of the main dependent variable of their own left-right self-placement.

4.7.8 Modelling

To formally test the hypotheses, I specify a linear regression model predicting self-placement. The outcome of interest is the interaction between treatment group and values. This is written as a formula below. To test H1 (economic hypothesis) I will evaluate the β_1 coefficient, and to test H2 (cultural hypothesis) I will evaluate the β_2 coefficient.

$$\text{Self} - \text{Placement} = \beta_1(\text{EconomicValues} \cdot \text{TreatmentCondition}) + \beta_2(\text{CulturalValues} \cdot \text{TreatmentCondition}) + \epsilon \quad (4.1)$$

4.8 Results

To help understand the data, I first present the effects of the treatment effect, without including the interaction term between values and left-right self-placement. Figure 4.4 shows the predicted left-right self-placement positions (and confidence intervals) across the three treatment groups, also including controls and political values in the model. The average left-right self-placement in the control group was just below 4.7. The group that was treated with questions on the economic dimension on average placed themselves slightly to the left of the control group, and the group treated with questions on the cultural dimension on average placed themselves slightly to the right of the control group. Neither of these direct effects of treatment group on left-right self-placement were statistically significant. As the average British voter is on the economic left and culturally conservative side of the values scales,

though, the effects are in the direction we would expect under the hypothesised impact of the treatment.

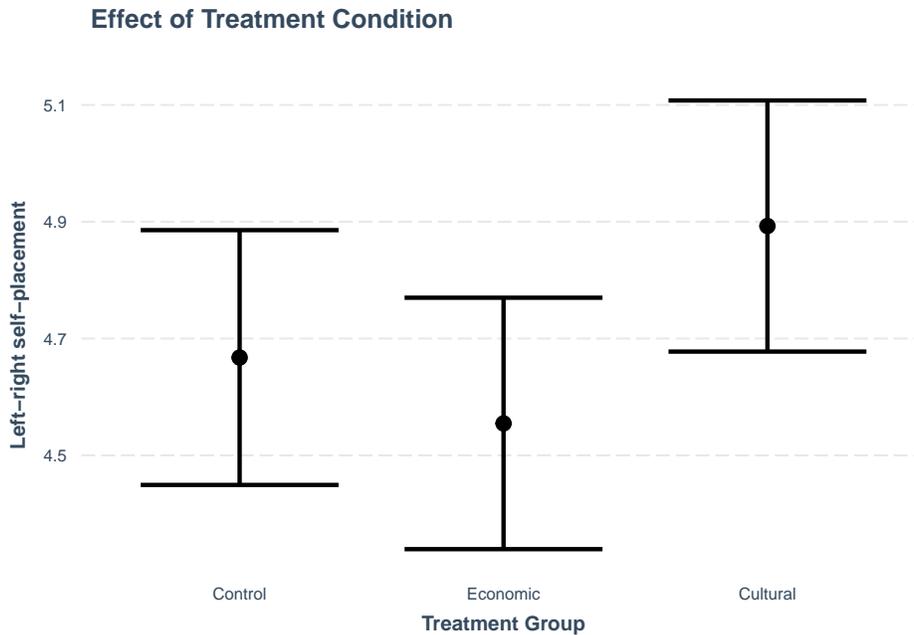


Figure 4.4: Predicted left-right self-placement for each treatment group

Note: Model includes values, political attention, age, education, and 2024 General Election Vote as controls.

The main (and pre-registered) interest of the hypotheses in this paper is the interaction effect between values and treatment group. It is not the direct effect of treatment group on left-right self-placement, but whether being in one of the treatment groups strengthens the relationship between the relevant value dimension and left-right self-placement. Figure 4.5 shows the interaction effects between both economic and cultural values and both treatment groups.

H1 predicted that priming respondents with questions on the economic dimension would lead them to choose a left-right self-placement more in line with their economic values. However, the left panel of Figure 4.5 shows that there is little difference in the strength of the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement for those in the control or economic treatment group. Equally, the effect of the economic treatment group seems to

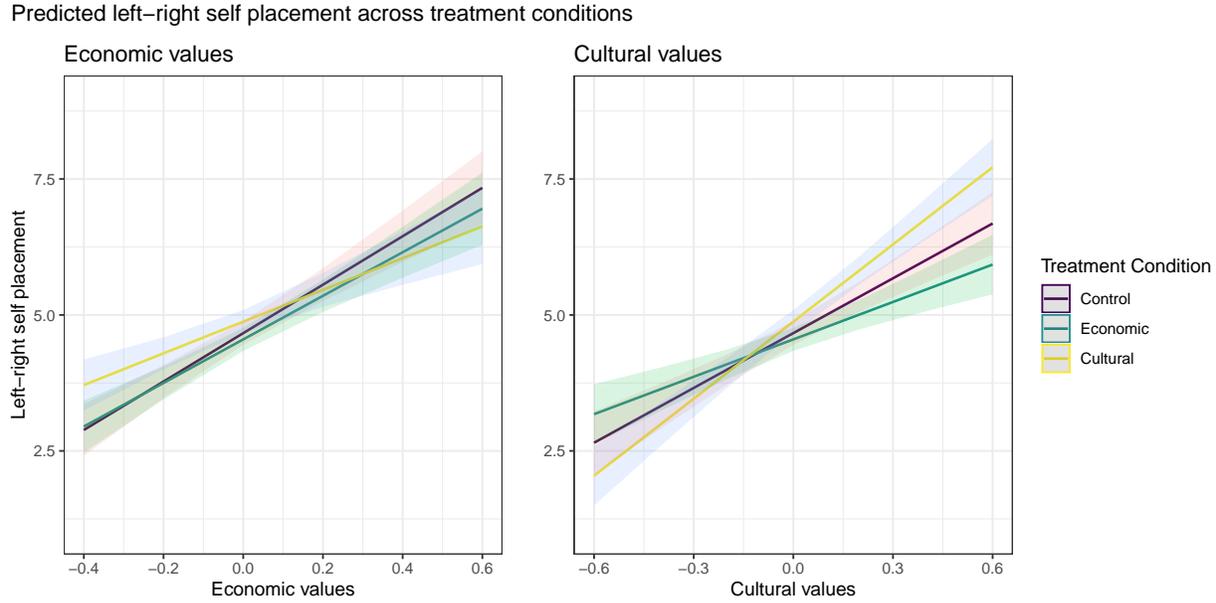


Figure 4.5: Interaction effect between treatment condition and values predicting left-right self-placement

The left panel shows the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement, and the right panel shows the relationship between cultural values and left-right self-placement.

weaken the relationship between cultural values and left-right self-placement, even while failing to improve the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement.

Turning to H2 and the impact of the cultural treatment, Figure 4.5 shows that the cultural treatment had a stronger impact. The cultural treatment appears to have weakened the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement. As hypothesised, though, it also does seem to have strengthened the relationship between cultural values and left-right self-placement when compared with the control group.

Table 4.1 shows the results of a linear regression model. The main results of interest are the interaction between treatment group and values. For example the coefficient “Treatment: Economic X Cultural values” is the interaction effect between the economic treatment and cultural values on the dependent variable (left-right self-placement).

The results in table 4.1 demonstrate that, for the control group, economic values were more predictive of left-right self-placement than cultural values. The economic treatment did

	Model 1
Intercept	4.17*** (0.28)
Economic values	4.45*** (0.54)
Cultural values	3.36*** (0.45)
Treatment: Economic	-0.12 (0.12)
Treatment: Social	0.21 (0.12)
Treatment: Economic X Econ values	-0.45 (0.73)
Treatment: Economic X Cultural values	-1.07 (0.60)
Treatment: Cultural X Econ values	-1.54* (0.74)
Treatment: Cultural X Cultural values	1.37* (0.59)
Controls Included	Y
R ²	0.55
Adj. R ²	0.54
Num. obs.	942

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 4.1: Predicting self-placement: Interaction effect between treatment and values

The dependent variable in this table is left-right self-placement, recorded on a scale from 0 (left) - 10 (right). Economic and treatment values both have a range of 1. The reference category for the variable “Treatment” is the control group. The interaction effects are between the treatment groups and someone’s values on each dimension.

not have a statistically significant interaction with either set of values, but the direction the interactions including the economic treatment group are both negative. This suggests it is unlikely that priming voters on issues on the economic dimension will cause respondents to choose their left-right self-placement in alignment with their economic values.

The interaction coefficients for the cultural treatment are both significant, and in different directions. As hypothesised, priming voters on issues on the cultural dimension did improve the relationship between cultural values and left-right self-placement. The cultural prime also weakened the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement to a similar degree.

4.8.1 Sub-group analysis

To better understand the impact of the treatments, I divided the sample across both value dimensions. This created four groups; a left-authoritarian group (with left economic and culturally authoritarian values); a right-authoritarian group (with right economic and culturally authoritarian values), a left-liberal group (with left economic and culturally liberal values) and a right-liberal group (with right economic and culturally liberal values). This division is by the mean score on the value dimensions, so these groups are made up of those with values that were more economically-left/right and more/less culturally conservative than the average person.

For each of these groups, we can form expectations of how self-placement might change in response to receiving the treatments. For the groups on the economic left (left-auth, left-lib) we would expect the economic treatment to move left-right self-placement leftwards. For those on the economic right (right-auth, right-lib), we would expect the economic treatment to move left-right self-placement rightwards. For those on the culturally liberal side of the spectrum (left-lib, right-lib), we would expect the cultural treatment to move left-right self-placement leftwards. Finally, for the culturally authoritarian groups (left-auth, right-auth) we would expect the cultural treatment to move left-right self-placement rightwards. This sub-group analysis is presented in Figure 4.6.

Viewing this sub-analysis helps to explain the overall results of the treatment effect. The economic treatment fails to have any substantive effect in each of the left-authoritarian, right-authoritarian or left-liberal groups. The only visible treatment effect for the economic treatment is that it seems to move right-liberals leftwards, which is in the opposite direction as was hypothesised! Even though this group hold views to the right of average on the economic values scale, the effect of the economic treatment is to move their left-right self-placement towards the left, slightly. This suggests the negative interaction effect between the economic treatment and the economic values is driven by right-liberals, though it remains a puzzle as to why this would be the case. One possible explanation could be that because the population

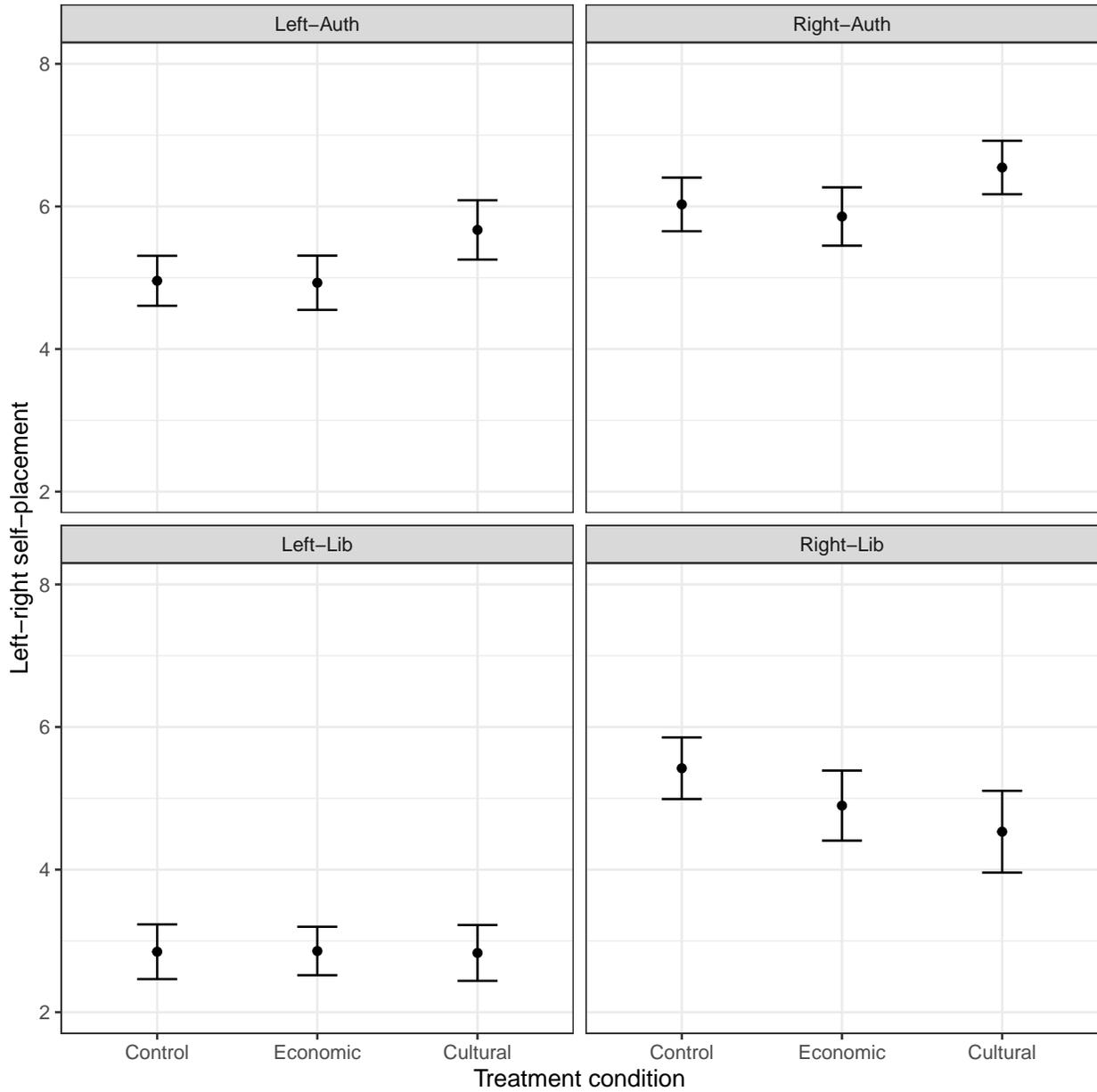


Figure 4.6: Sub-group analysis of the treatment effect within each ideological sub-group

These plots show the predicted left-right self-placement for each treatment group within each ideological sub-group. Moving clockwise from the top left, the ‘Left-Auth’ panel contains those with economically left and culturally authoritarian values. The ‘Right-Auth’ panel contains those with economically right and culturally authoritarian values. The bottom right panel includes those with economically right and culturally liberal values. The bottom left panel contains those with left economic and culturally liberal values.

skews to the left on economic issue (as presented earlier in Figure 2.2), even those coded as right-liberals are still primed in a leftwards direction by questions on economic issues.

However this fails to explain why the economic treatment would drive *only* right-liberals leftwards while there was no effect of the economic treatment on any other ideological sub-group. That this cross-pressured group reacts to either dimension of priming with a move towards the left requires further research.

Turning to the effects of the cultural treatment, it seems to work in the expected direction across the left-authoritarian, right-authoritarian and right-liberal groups, while having no effect on the left-liberal group. The left-liberal group is therefore the only ideological sub-group where priming on either dimension has no effect - this group is consistent in their left-right self-placement regardless of the priming questions they receive.

Before considering the implications of the findings, I will first explore the differential results for the two hypotheses. Why is it that only the cultural treatment worked as expected, but not the economic treatment?

One explanation could be that of a ‘ceiling effect’ for economic values. That is, if those in the control group were already choosing a self-placement level that is maximally linked to their left-right self-placement, there would be little room for the economic treatment to have an impact. However, the range of self-placements in the control group leaves very few respondents at the poles of ‘0’ and ‘10’, so there should be ‘room’ for almost all respondents to be impacted by the treatments. Outside of a literal ceiling effect, economic values have been more predictive of left-right self-placement historically (de Vries et al., 2013), so it is possible that a treatment *could* make the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement stronger and more like it has been in the past.

If there is no ceiling effect, another explanation for the greater impact of the cultural treatment is required. This requires a consideration of the political context at the time of the survey. The survey was collected on the 20th and 21st May 2025, during which time YouGov polling on the most important issues facing the country showed people were equally likely to name the economy and immigration as important issues (YouGov, 2025). Another consideration is that, in the control group, economic values were slightly more predictive of

left-right self-placement than cultural values, though both were important (See table 4.1). Equally, economic issues have had a greater association with left-right political competition in the UK than have cultural issues over the longer-term (Fernandez-Vazquez and Somer-Topcu, 2019; Somer-Topcu, Tavits and Baumann, 2020). As found in Chapter 2, it is only in recent years where cultural values have begun to be more predictive of left-right self-placement than economic values.

If British voters have a longer-term association of economic issues and left-right, and have only more recently begun to incorporate cultural issues into their left-right space, this could explain why there is a difference between the treatment groups. One outcome for the experiment could have been that cultural issues are so salient in 2025 that the cultural treatment had little effect, while the economic treatment reminded voters of a previous association between economic issues and the left-right self-placement. This is not what the results indicate. Instead, the results suggest there is still room for voters to be primed to associate the left-right space with cultural issues, while the linkages between economic values and left-right space may already be so familiar to voters that there is little impact of priming them on this linkage. This is the case even for the left-authoritarian group who are assumed to be cross-pressured between their left-economic and culturally-authoritarian values.

4.8.2 Did the economic treatment work as intended?

To rule out the results being caused by the treatment design, I have analysed responses to the treatment question and responses to the open-text questions at the end of the surveys. This is to ensure the differential effect of the economic and cultural treatments, and especially the null effects of the economic treatment, are not caused by the choice of questions included in the treatment.

In the design of the treatment, I used questions from the British Election Study Internet Panel (British Election Study, 2024) that correlated well with the relevant value dimension. One of the questions, for example, asks whether cuts to public spending have gone too far

or not gone far enough - this is a question that works well to divide the British public on economic values, so should theoretically be as effective as the cultural questions included.

We can test whether this was the case in the experiment by looking at the responses to the treatment questions, because they contain information on people's own positions *and* perceptions of other people's positions on the issues. Firstly, I analysed how well people's own positions on the treatment questions correlated with their values on the relevant dimension. The results look similar between the two dimensions. Correlations with the cultural values range from 0.38 on the privacy/crime question, to 0.53 to on the immigration question. For the economic dimension, correlations with economic values range from 0.38 on the spending question to 0.56 on the redistribution question. A full correlation matrix of these questions can be found in appendix 4.F. These correlations suggest that the questions are priming the relevant issue dimension.

Another possibility is that people have a less strong understanding of how well the questions used for cultural priming map onto the left-right space. For example, are people aware of a divergence between left- and right-wing people on immigration attitudes? If people are completely unaware of this, priming through the questions alone would not work. To analyse this, I compare responses to the treatment questions that ask respondents to guess the position of the 'average left-wing' and 'average right-wing' person. Figure 4.7 plots the differences between perceived left- and right-wing responses across the questions. On the redistribution question for example, a score of '10' would be someone who perceives the average left-wing person to have the most left-wing view possible and the average right-wing person to have the most right-wing view possible. A score of 0 represents someone who perceives no difference between left- and right-wing positions on the issue. A negative score represents someone who incorrectly believes the average right-wing person as being more pro-redistribution than the average left-wing person, for example.

The panels in 4.7 show that for all issues, the average person perceives a difference in the expected direction between the left-wing and right-wing positions. People are generally

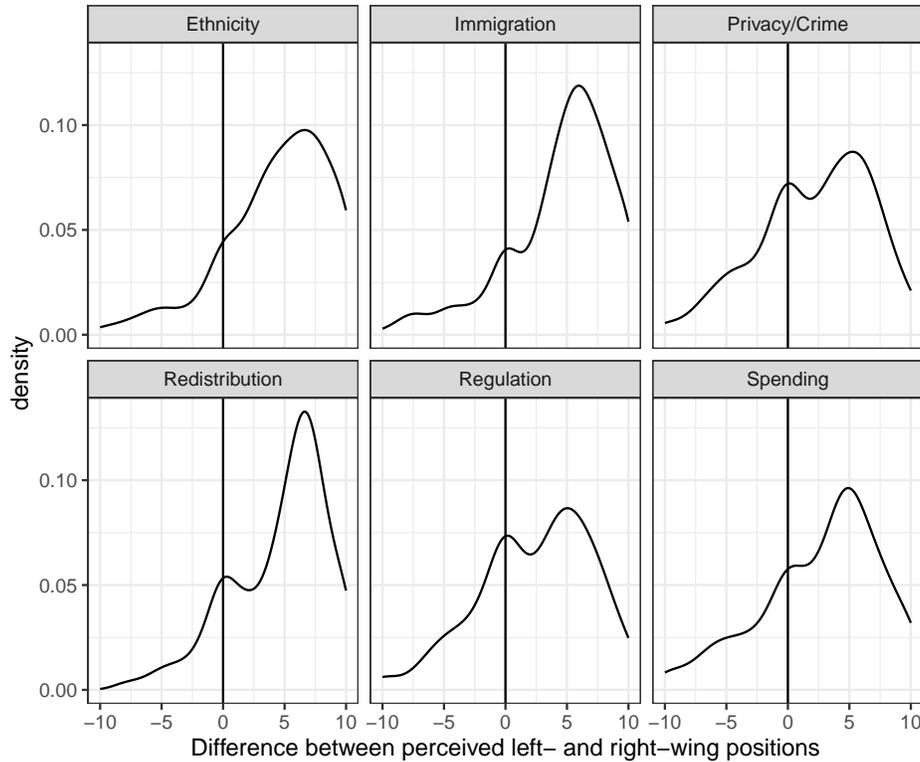


Figure 4.7: Density plots of perceived positions of others.

Values along the x-axis show the perceived difference between the average left-wing and average right-wing position on a scale of 0-10, after all questions have been rescaled so that a score of ‘10’ represents the expected ‘right-wing’ viewpoint, and ‘0’ is the left-wing end of the scale. As the x-axis represents the difference between perceived positions of left- and right-wing individuals, a score of 0 on this scale (marked with the vertical line) is someone who perceives no difference between the average left-wing and average right-wing position. ‘10’ on the x-axis represents someone who placed the right-wing position as ‘10’ and the left-wing position as ‘0’, while -10 would represent someone who perceives the left-wing position as ‘10’ and the right-wing position as ‘0’.

aware of the ideological norms for these questions. Greater polarisation is perceived on the cultural issues of ethnicity and immigration and the economic issues of redistribution and spending. The issues that show higher levels of uncertainty of the difference between left- and right-wing positions are the cultural privacy/crime issue and the economic regulation issue. However, even for these issues, the average respondent sees a difference between left- and right-wing positions in the correct direction.

Given these findings from the response questions, there is little evidence that the economic

treatment is overall weaker than the cultural treatment.

To confirm that exposure to the treatment questions impacted understandings of the left-right space (outside of the impact on self-placement), I included the open-text manipulation check questions at the end of the survey. After reporting left-right self-placement, respondents were asked two open-text questions; “What do you think of when you hear the term left-wing?” and “what do you think of when you hear the term right-wing?”. I analyse whether the treatment groups thought about the terms differently than the control group – did the economic treatment group provide explanations with more economic content, and did the cultural treatment group provide explanations with more cultural content?

Firstly, the length of responses in both treatment groups was longer than the control group for both questions. The control group on average wrote 8.68 words in response to the left-wing question, and 7.74 words in response to the right-wing question. For the economic treatment group, they wrote on average 9.44 words in response to the left-wing question, and 9.39 words in response to the right-wing question. For the cultural treatment group, they wrote 9.98 words about the term ‘left-wing’, and 9.08 words about the term ‘right-wing’. This suggests that the treatments did add some additional context for respondents to draw on when thinking about these questions.

Next, I removed words such as “and” and “I” that did not convey substantive information about beliefs, and compared the frequency with which words appeared within each treatment condition. I combined responses for both questions. Figure 4.8 shows the words used in each treatment group, compared with the control group. The first panel compares the economic treatment group and control group, while the second plot compares the cultural treatment group with the control group. The words above the diagonal lines were used more by the treatment groups than the control group.

The most frequently used words across all groups were party names, ideological words like “liberal” and “conservative”, as well as the word “people”. Comparing first the usage of words between the economic treatment group and the control group, it seems that some

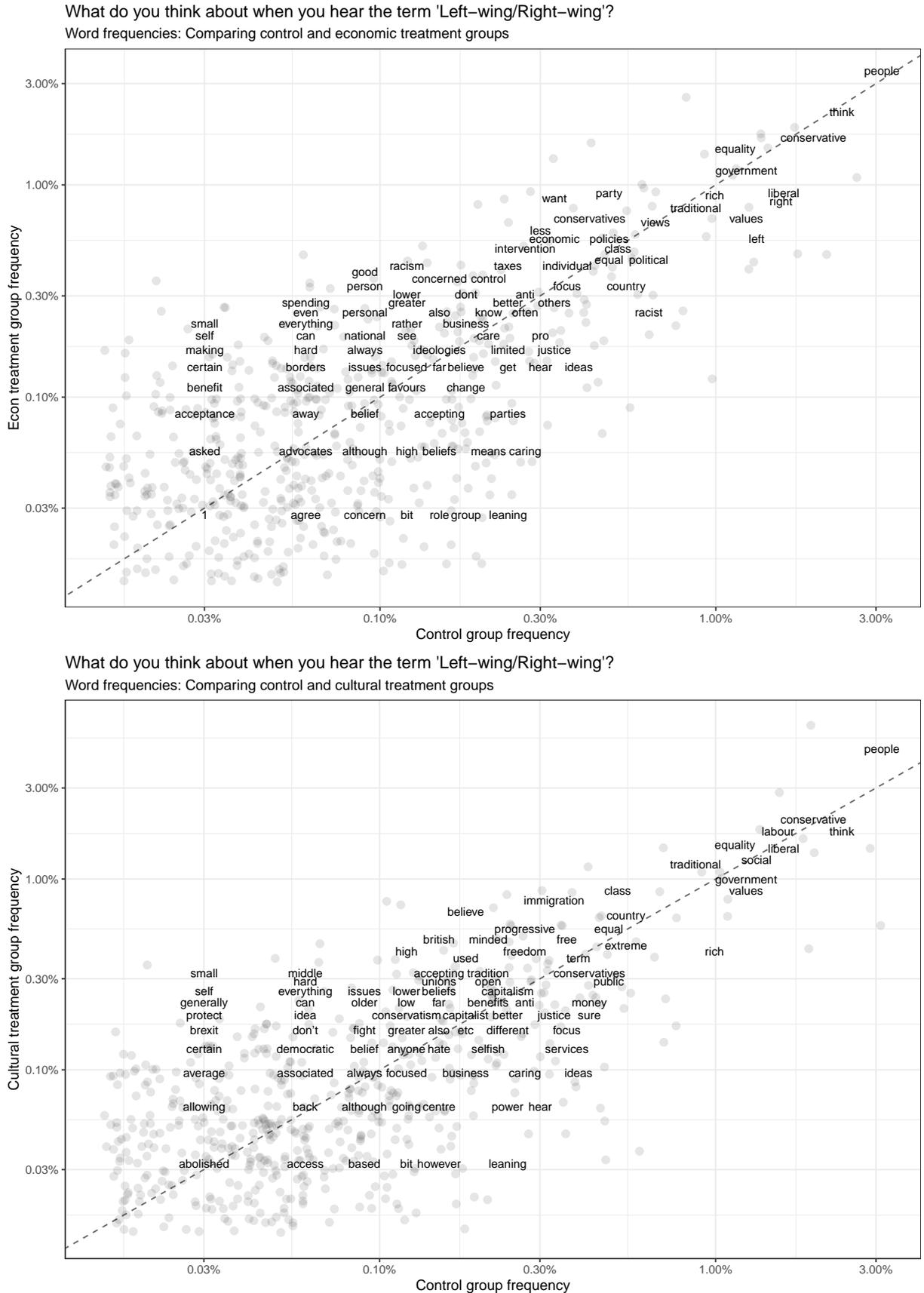


Figure 4.8: Word frequencies across treatment groups

words about economics were used more frequently by those in the economic treatment group such as “spending”, “tax[es]”, “economic”, “equality” and “intervention”. The economic group were also slightly more likely to name some cultural issues than the control group, such as “borders” and “racism”, though the control group were more likely to use other words related to the cultural dimension such as “racist” or “justice”.

Turning to the comparison between the cultural treatment group and control group, here the cultural treatment group uses many cultural dimension terms more often, such as “British”, “Brexit” and “immigration”. They were also less likely than the control group to use some words related to the economic dimension, such as “rich” or “business”, though they were more likely to talk about “class”.

Words used more in the control group than either treatment group were often words that would seemingly provide little explanation; such as being more likely to repeat words from the question such as “right-wing” and “left-wing”, alternative ideological words such as “liberal”, or unspecific terms like “political” or “values”.

The evidence from the analysis of the open-text questions suggests that the treatments did have an impact on how people thought about the left-right space, particularly adding context on the relevant dimension. Whilst it is possible that the treatment groups had unintended effects, it seems that they did seem to prime respondents to think about the relevant dimension as planned.

4.9 Conclusion

Priming on the linkages between the cultural dimension and the left-right space influences people to choose a left-right self-placement closer to their cultural values. This effect is not found through priming on the economic dimension. This provides some supporting evidence for the previously assumed mechanism behind left-right self-placements becoming increasingly representative of cultural values, due to the increased salience and partisan

political competition over cultural issues such as immigration.

The differential impact on priming economic issues and cultural issues has important implications for how we think about the impacts of issue salience on party competition. The evidence suggests that those with anti-immigration views vote for radical right anti-immigration parties when the salience of immigration is high (Dennison and Geddes, 2019). We might therefore also expect that the reverse is true – that emphasising issues on the economic dimension will reduce the support for radical right parties, given their positioning on economic issues is often ambiguous or ‘blurry’ (Rovny, 2012; Rovny and Polk, 2020). However, I find that priming the cultural dimension is much more effective than priming economic issues at shifting self-placement.

The context of British politics under which this experiment took place was a radical right party (Reform UK) beginning to lead in the polls, ahead of the governing Labour Party and the official opposition party, the Conservative party. Reform UK is a party positioned on the culturally conservative end of the political spectrum. However, its economic positioning is more vague, like many other parties on the radical right (Rovny and Polk, 2020; Rovny et al., 2025). Many of its potential voters are not themselves on the economic right - and this may lead parties to consider whether its voters can be ‘won back’ through raising the salience of economic issues. The results of this experiment do not suggest this would be an easy endeavour. Instead, even with the already existing high salience of immigration as the political context for this experiment, it was easier to prime voters to move their left-right self-placement towards their cultural values. Whether someone sees themselves as on the left- or right-wing half of the scale also seems increasingly relevant, as party competition in the UK increasingly involves people choosing between parties in the left- or right- bloc, rather than between parties on the left or right (Griffiths et al., 2026).

This finding can also be compared with some of the longitudinal results found in Chapter 2. In the context of the 2024 General Election, the most frequently given ‘most important issue’ was the cost of living, an issue squarely on the economic dimension. Yet, the analysis

of the 2024 General Election wave showed that economic values continued to become less predictive of left-right self-placement. Both results suggest that raising the salience of economic issues is unlikely to re-orient left-right self-placement back in the direction of economic values being dominant over cultural issues.

The differential impact of priming on the economic versus cultural issue dimension may also suggest that the changing of the left-right space towards the cultural dimension may be indicative of a longer-term realignment where cultural issues are more central to the main left-right conception of political competition. If priming economic issues does little to shift the usage of the left-right scale, it seems difficult to see how we could see a reversal of the trend of cultural issues becoming more important than economic issues.

Outside of the UK, the present study contributes to the literature exploring issue salience, particularly studies that explore the impact that issue salience has on congruence between voters and their parties (Giger and Lefkofridi, 2014). Not only does issue salience seem related to where people place parties in the left-right space, but it also impacts where they place themselves. Increased party congruence on salient issues may partially be explained by individual's moving their left-right self-placement more in line with their values when an issue on that dimension becomes salient.

The priming in this study uses only questions as the prime rather than any information. This suggests that survey researchers should be cautious about measuring multiple dimensions of ideology at once. Whilst it may be useful to have multiple measures of ideology in one study, the experiment results suggests that certain policy questions could prime and change left-right self-placement. Previous findings suggest that question-order effects can change responses in surveys (Tourangeau et al., 1989), and the current study suggests that even a question as frequently used as left-right self-placement is vulnerable to bias if asked after commonly used measures of operational ideology.

While the usage of a survey experiment in this paper makes it easier to assess the direct effect of salience on left-right self-placement, this may prompt concerns about external valid-

ity. This experiment uses a strong prime that specifically invites respondents to think about issues in the left-right space, so it may be that less strong (perhaps more realistic) priming on issue salience may have less impact on left-right self-placement. Nevertheless, this ‘stronger’ prime was still not strong enough for the economic treatment to have an effect. It would be helpful if future research could clarify whether raising the salience of an issue dimension alone would replicate the findings of this survey, or whether the prime must include the linkage of the issue with the left-right space in order to see the effect found in this study. Additionally, given that the prime in this experiment uses survey questions, it may be useful for future research to use a prime that more directly mirrors the influence of political elites, perhaps presenting respondents with politicians discussing issues on either the economic or cultural dimension.

Another limitation of this study is that it doesn’t address the role of parties. Naming specific parties may have decreased the internal validity of the experiment – as people would likely incorporate judgements of competence, interfering with the direct effect of salience. However, it would be useful for future research to address the interaction between parties, issue salience and left-right self-placement.

Finally, this study raises the overall ‘top-of-the-head salience’ of each issue dimension through priming respondents to think about specific policies in the left-right space. It would be complementary for future research to include analysis of whether this priming actually shifted individual-level issue importance, especially if this might help explain the differential impact of primes on the two issue dimensions.

Appendix 4.A Survey sample

Sample	Degree	Age	White	Female	Political Attention
British Election Study W29	0.51	56.17	0.91	0.51	6.83
Survey Experiment	0.57	41.28	0.82	0.49	6.02

Table 4.2: Comparison with BES sample demographics

This table shows the differences in means of demographic variables between the British Election Study wave 29 sample and the survey experiment sample. The British Election Study sample excludes all of those who didn't answer the left-right self-placement question, to be more comparable with my sample. Political attention is collected on a scale 0-10.

Appendix 4.B Values questions

These are the questions used to create the economic values and cultural values scores. They come from the 2024 BES post-election study (Fieldhouse et al., 2025). Response options are a five-point Likert scale from ‘Strongly disagree’ to ‘Strongly agree’.

- EC1: ‘Ordinary working people get their fair share of the nation’s wealth’
- EC2: ‘There is one law for the rich and one for the poor’
- EC3: ‘There is no need for strong trade unions to protect working conditions and wages’
- EC4: ‘Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain’s economic problems’
- EC5: ‘Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership’
- EC6: ‘It is the government’s responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one’

These are the questions for the cultural values scale:

- LA1: ‘Young people today don’t have enough respect for traditional British values’
- LA2: ‘Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards’
- LA3: ‘People should be allowed to organise public protests against the government’
- LA4: ‘People in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lives’
- LA5: ‘For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence’
- LA6: ‘People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences’

Appendix 4.C Creating values scores through blackbox scaling

Table 4.3 shows the weights created through the blackbox scaling for the economic values score. The question with the highest weight on the economic values score is EC4 (‘Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain’s economic problems’). The question with the lowest weight is EC5 (‘Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership’).

Question	N	c	Weight	R^2
EC1	942	2.04	-2.88	0.39
EC2	942	4.01	3.03	0.44
EC3	942	1.94	-2.87	0.39
EC4	942	2.83	-3.29	0.49
EC5	942	3.66	2.40	0.29
EC6	942	3.18	2.44	0.21

Table 4.3: Scaling of economic values

Table 4.4 shows the weights created through blackbox scaling for the cultural values score. The largest weight is given to the question LA5 (‘For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence’). The smallest weight is given to question LA3 (‘People should be allowed to organise public protests against the government’).

Question	N	c	Weight	R^2
LA1	942	3.33	3.65	0.56
LA2	942	2.66	2.87	0.30
LA3	942	4.24	-1.60	0.20
LA4	942	3.63	-2.00	0.28
LA5	942	3.15	4.88	0.67
LA6	942	3.75	2.88	0.48

Table 4.4: Scaling of cultural values

Appendix 4.D Treatment Questions

For each of the treatment questions, respondents in the treatment group are asked about their own position on a policy, and then where they believe 'the average left-wing person' would be positioned, and where they believe 'the average right-wing person' would be positioned. In Figure 4.2, I include a screenshot to show the question format only for the immigration question. For the remaining questions, I only note here the first (self position) of these three questions, but respondents were asked about perceptions of left-wing and right-wing people for each policy. Response options were on an 11-point 0-10 scale for each question, with the end-points labelled.

4.D.1 Economic treatment questions

- Redistribution: 'Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to **make people's incomes more equal**. Other people feel that **the government should be much less concerned** about how equal people's incomes are. Where would you place yourself on this scale?'
- Regulation: 'Some people think the government should **increase regulation** of the economy, and others think the government should **reduce regulation** of the economy. Where would you place yourself on this scale?'
- Spending: 'Some people think that cuts to public spending have **gone too far** and other people think they have **not gone far enough**. Where would you place yourself on the scale?'

4.D.2 Cultural treatment questions

- Immigration: 'Some people think that the UK should allow **many more** immigrants to come to the UK to live and others think that the UK should allow **many fewer**

immigrants. Where would you place yourself on this scale?’

- Ethnicity: ‘Some people think attempts to give equal opportunities to black and Asian people in Britain have **gone too far** while other people think they have **not gone far enough**. Where would you place yourself on this scale?’
- Privacy: ‘Some people feel that, in order to **fight terrorism**, we have to accept infringements on **privacy and civil liberties**, others feel that privacy and civil liberties are to be protected at all cost. Where would you place yourself on this scale?’

Appendix 4.E Regression results

	Model 1
Intercept	4.13*** (0.28)
Economic values	3.77*** (0.34)
Cultural values	3.49*** (0.27)
Treatment: Econ	-0.11 (0.12)
Treatment: Cultural	0.23 (0.12)
Age	0.01 (0.00)
Education	0.01 (0.05)
Political Attention	0.04 (0.02)
2024 GE Vote: Conservative	0.79*** (0.17)
2024 GE Vote: Green Party	-0.53 (0.27)
2024 GE Vote: Labour	-0.67*** (0.14)
2024 GE Vote: Liberal Democrat	-0.23 (0.20)
2024 GE Vote: Reform UK	1.58*** (0.20)
2024 GE Vote: SNP	-0.86* (0.37)
R ²	0.54
Adj. R ²	0.53
Num. obs.	942

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 4.5: Model including all variables, without interaction between values and treatment group.

Note: Non-voters were the reference group for 2024 GE Vote

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	4.13*** (0.27)	4.27*** (0.33)	4.17*** (0.28)
Economic values	3.72*** (0.34)		4.45*** (0.54)
Cultural values	3.51*** (0.27)		3.36*** (0.45)
Treatment: Economic		-0.10 (0.15)	-0.12 (0.12)
Treatment: Social		0.19 (0.15)	0.21 (0.12)
Treatment: Economic X Econ values			-0.45 (0.73)
Treatment: Economic X Cultural values			-1.07 (0.60)
Treatment: Cultural X Econ values			-1.54* (0.74)
Treatment: Cultural X Cultural values			1.37* (0.59)
Controls Included	Y	Y	Y
R ²	0.53	0.35	0.55
Adj. R ²	0.53	0.34	0.54
Num. obs.	942	942	942

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table 4.6: Models predicting self-placement

These models show separately the effect of values and the treatments on left-right self-placement. Controls are included in these models though not presented.

Appendix 4.F Correlation between values and treatment questions

Plot 4.9 shows the correlations between the main value dimensions and the treatment questions. This is to test that the treatment questions correlate with the expected value dimension. This correlation plot confirms that the economic treatment questions correlate better with the economic value scores than the cultural value scores. The cultural treatment questions correlate better with the cultural value scores than the economic value scores. This suggests the treatments work as expected.

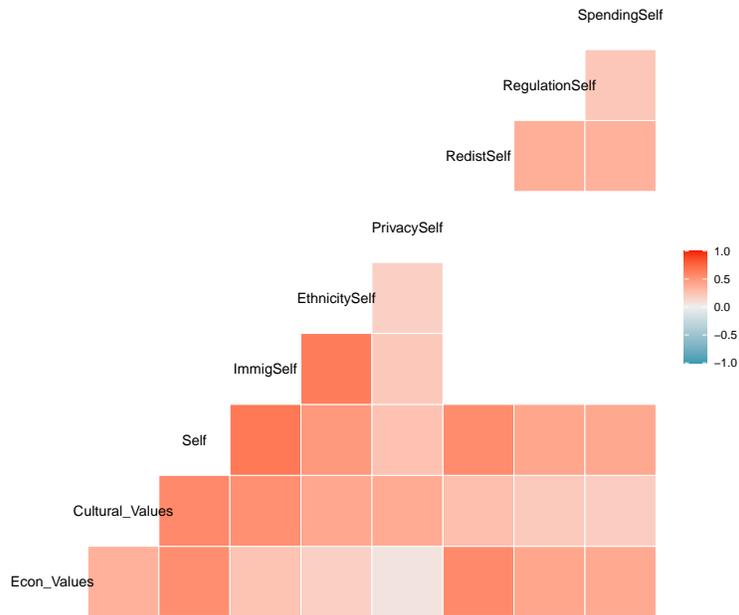


Figure 4.9: Correlations between values and treatment questions

‘Econ-values’ and ‘Cultural-values’ are the values scores used in this paper. ‘Self’ is someone’s left-right self-placement. ‘ImmigSelf’, ‘EthnicitySelf’ and ‘PrivacySelf’ are where those in the cultural treatment group placed themselves on the cultural treatment questions. ‘RedistSelf’, ‘RegulationSelf’, and ‘SpendingSelf’ are where those in the economic treatment group placed themselves on the economic treatment questions. There is no correlation between the cultural treatment and economic treatment questions as no one received both treatments.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In this conclusion I will first summarise the main findings of the three papers included in this thesis. I will then address some of the common themes that are highlighted when reading these papers together. I will then summarise address the limitations of this thesis and avenues for further research. Finally, I will summarise the implications of this thesis.

5.1 Summary of findings

All three papers in this thesis address the relationship between operational and symbolic identity in the UK. Chapter 2 examines how this relationship looks and changes over ten years in the UK. Chapter 3 adds detail on the political context, and considers how the EU referendum fits into this story. Finally, Chapter 4 used a survey experiment to explore whether changing the salience of linkages between symbolic and operational ideology impacts how people place themselves on the left-right self-placement scale.

5.1.1 Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, I found that the relationship between left-right self-placement and political values varies over time and between individuals. On the left half of the self-placement scale,

self-placement aligned well with economic values. On the right half of the self-placement scale, self-placement was more likely to be aligned with cultural values. This was at least partially explained by the issues voters reported as most important to them. For those whose most important issue was economic, there was a stronger relationship between left-right self-placement and economic values. For those whose most important issue was on the cultural dimension, there was a stronger relationship between left-right self-placement and cultural values.

Over time, economic values became less aligned with left-right self-placement. Instead, left-right self-placement was increasingly predicted by cultural values. The weakening role of economic values was driven most strongly by the right half of the scale. The strengthened role of cultural values in predicting self-placement was driven by the increasing alignment between cultural values and self-placement for those identifying on the left. The changes over time were not explained well by changing issue importance over time.

5.1.2 Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, I utilised the multiple measures of operational and symbolic ideology to assess claims about realignment around the EU referendum in the UK. Using this ideological data, I found that the 2015 Labour coalition contained ideological divisions along the lines of the EU referendum. On the other hand, would-be Conservative Leavers and would-be Conservative Remainers looked ideologically aligned in 2015.

After the referendum, these divisions in the Labour party base crystallised, as Labour leavers perceived their party as moving away from them and defected in the elections of 2015, 2017 and 2024. However, the starker division was in the Conservative party. While the Conservative coalition was ideologically united in 2015, after the referendum divisions emerged between Conservative leavers and Conservative remainers. Conservative remainers perceived a growing distance between themselves and their party, and also defected in 2015, 2017 and 2024. The only reason this divide looks less stark in 2024 is because Conservative

leavers were equally likely to have defected from their party by this point, albeit in a different direction.

Evidently, whether the EU referendum looks like a consequence or cause of realignment is dependent on the party in focus. While much attention has been paid to the Labour party's loss of the 'red wall' in 2019, perhaps more analysis is required of the Conservative party's loss of the 'blue wall' in 2024, as culturally liberal voters abandoned the party they had once supported.

5.1.3 Chapter 4

Chapter 4 aims to answer a question raised in chapter 2. Can the change in the relationship between left-right self-placement and two dimensions of operational ideology be explained by changing issue salience? Can priming voters on the linkages between the economic or cultural dimension of politics and the left-right space cause them to shift their self-placement?

I find that priming voters on the link between cultural values and the left-right space leads them to pick a left-right self-placement more in line with their cultural values. However, there was no effect of the economic prime. This result suggests that priming by politicians or the media on the cultural dimension can impact left-right self-placement. It does not seem like it would be as easy for voters to be primed to align their left-right self-placement with their economic values.

5.2 Recurring themes across the three papers

The following section of the conclusion summarises some of the themes arising from the three papers, where assessing the papers in tandem may illuminate some findings that are not as evident when looking at the papers in isolation.

5.2.1 The declining role of economic values in left-right self-placement

In Chapter 2, I found that economic values had become less predictive of left-right self-placement over time. An initial interpretation of this result might be that this was due to the high salience of cultural issues, particularly immigration and Brexit, over the last ten years. This might suggest, then, that if an economic issue again became salient and important to voters, economic values would strengthen as predictors of left-right self-placement.

This is not what the results in Chapter 4 and the latter half of Chapter 2 suggest. In 2024, an economic issue (the cost of living) was the most cited most important issue by voters. Economic issues were once again salient. Yet the relationship between economic values and left-right self-placement weakened further in 2024. Whilst this was only one data point, the findings of the experiment in Chapter 4 point in a similar direction. In Chapter 4, I find that priming voters on the linkage between economic values and left-right self-placement has little impact. It does not, as might have been theorised, make voters choose a self-placement more in line with their economic values.

The findings of these two chapters suggest that the increasing alignment between left-right self-placement and cultural values, at the expense of economic values, may be here to stay. Neither an election with highly salient economic issues, nor a priming experiment, was able to reverse the direction of travel here.

5.2.2 Ideological coherence and asymmetry across the left-right space

This thesis contributes to our understanding of the ideological coherence of the electorate. The alignment between two dimensions of operational and symbolic ideology can be interpreted as a measure of ideological constraint. There is significant disagreement about the usefulness of self-reported measures of symbolic ideology, as many voters fail to align this ideological identity with their views across multiple issues (Converse, 1964; Kinder and Kalmoe, 2017). Yet, concluding that voters are ‘ideologically innocent’ could be understating the

insights that self-reported ideological measures can provide (Jost, 2006; 2021). A failure of voters to provide ‘consistent’ opinions across multiple issues may also not simply be a misunderstanding of politics from voters - it may instead represent the diversity of political viewpoints that a single dimension political competition fails to provide for (Feldman and Johnston, 2014; Gidron, 2022; Groenendyk, Kimbrough and Pickup, 2022).

This thesis contributes to this debate by providing evidence that the ideological consistency of the electorate varies both over time and across the political spectrum. As found in Chapter 2, there is increasing alignment between the left half of the self-placement scale and values on both economic and cultural issues. At the start of the period studied (2014), those who placed themselves at the extreme left of the self-placement scale held a wide range of values on the cultural scale. A decade later, however, left self-placement is strongly correlated with values on both the economic and cultural values scales. In Chapter 4, I found that left-liberals were the group least affected by priming, too. This is understandable in a political context where this group is increasingly aligned between symbolic ideology and both dimensions of operational ideology. If they are not cross-pressured, and have a strong understanding of ideological norms, they should be less vulnerable to priming.

At the other end of the self-placement spectrum, Chapter 2 found there was little alignment between self-placement on the right half of the scale and economic values. Over time, the relationship between economic values and self-placement on the right half of the scale weakened. From Chapter 2 alone, one might conclude that this increasingly cross-pressured segment of the population might question their strong right-wing self-placement under conditions where economic issues were again salient. However, the results of Chapter 4 suggest this is perhaps unlikely. Reminding left-authoritarians of the linkages between economic issues and the left-right scale did nothing to re-orient their self-placement to align with their left economic values.

These combined findings suggest a fundamental asymmetry in the ideological alignment between operational and symbolic ideology. Findings from the US have been mixed on this

issue. Ellis and Stimson's 2012 findings suggest that there is a disproportionate number of conflicted conservatives (those mixing liberal operational ideology with conservative symbolic ideology). Alternatively, Claassen, Tucker and Smith (2015) found evidence of both conflicted conservatism *and* conflicted liberalism. The findings of this thesis suggest that, by 2024, the UK looks more in line with the findings of Ellis and Stimson's (2012) study. In recent years in the UK, those identifying on the right were much less likely to have values that align with their self-placement than those on the left. This is driven by the mismatch with economic values specifically.

5.2.3 Changing economic values for right-liberals

There are two cross-pressured groups when we consider two dimensions of operational ideology; left-authoritarians and right-liberals. Since left-authoritarians represent a larger segment of the population in Western democracies (Denham, 2020; Lefkofridi, Wagner and Willmann, 2014; Malka, Lelkes and Soto, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020) they generally receive more attention from political scientists than right-liberals do. Yet, Chapter 4 of this thesis found that right-liberals responded in unexpected ways to the salience treatment. Reminding this group of linkages between the left-right space and economic values actually encourages this group to identify further to the left. This group likely overlaps somewhat with the cross-pressured Conservative remainers observed in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 3, I found that this group of Conservative remainers - despite their disagreement with the Conservative party being along cultural lines - began to move economically leftwards in the wake of the EU referendum. These two unexpected findings suggest perhaps something interesting about priming identity in this right-liberal group. As right-wing identity is increasingly representative of cultural conservatism, right-liberals group may be alienated from a right-wing identity. That this may also be impacting their economic values is an interesting possibility, and deserves further attention. These findings also illustrate the complexity of identifying the causal relationships between operational and symbolic ideology.

Can misalignment on one dimension of operational ideology and symbolic ideology drive a change in symbolic ideology which then in turn drives changes in the other dimension of operational ideology? The findings on conservative remainers and right-liberals in chapters 3 and 4 indicate this could be the case, but further analysis of the causal pathways here are necessary.

Understanding this right-liberal group better will also help us understand the 2024 election, where many ‘blue wall’ seats in the south of England moved away from the Conservative party towards the Liberal Democrats (Dorey, 2024). Examinations of cross-pressured voters should not be limited only to left-authoritarians, as this may obscure some of the underlying changes in ideological alignment.

5.3 Limitations and further research

One limitation of this thesis is that its exploration of symbolic ideology focuses on the extent to which it is associated with operational ideology. This is reliant on the idea that symbolic ideology is a way of summarising one’s issue positions from multiple dimensions of operational ideology. However, from another perspective, symbolic ideology is not only a representation of ideological beliefs, but an identity (Goren, Motta and Smith, 2020; Malka and Lelkes, 2010). A valuable direction for future research would be to explore the simultaneous influence of operational ideology and identity explanations on left-right self-placement, especially including reflections from the political psychology literature on political identities. This would be extremely helpful for furthering our understanding of how individuals think of themselves in the left-right place.

Another extension of this thesis would be an exploration of the causal pathways between operational ideology, symbolic ideology, and issue importance. The direction of causation between these three concepts is likely multi-directional and extremely complex, as indicated by some of the findings in this thesis. For example, Chapter 3 suggests that the EU referendum

may have caused Conservative remainers to move away from their right-wing self-placement *and* away from the Conservative party *and* to move their economic values leftwards. Due to the complexity of these causal pathways, this thesis has focused instead on analysing the association between these concepts without assuming a causal pathway. However, it would be useful for future research to more directly outline the causal pathways to help explain how much shifts on one dimension of ideology cause or are caused by shifts on another.

Another limitation of the scope of this thesis is that it largely explores the left-right ideological space without a focus on partisanship, with the exception of a focus on the Labour and Conservative coalitions in Chapter 3. However, alongside identity, attitudes towards parties may add to the understanding of the relationship between operational and symbolic ideology. For example, how close someone feels towards a political party may help explain how someone cross-pressured across multiple dimensions of political conflict chooses one side of the left-right self-placement scale to identify on.

A further extension to this thesis would be an expansion of these theories outside of the UK context, perhaps in a comparative context. This would be important to test the extent to which any findings are specific to the UK or generalisable to other contexts. In addition, a comparative approach could allow the integration of country-level factors into the analysis of ideology and left-right self-placement, such as analysing the relevance of factors such as the number of effective parties or the required number of dimensions to explain the spatial competition between parties.

Another direction for future research would be to integrate this bottom-up analysis of ideology with a top-down analysis of how political elites supply information about ideology to voters. Alongside a comparative approach as described above, it may be useful to combine elite-level data with mass level opinion data to analyse how political elites may communicate ideology to voters.

Finally, this thesis is limited in that all analysis focuses on those who are able to place themselves on the left-right self-placement scale. Those who are unable to place themselves

on the left-right scale are likely to be those who pay the least attention to politics, so their understanding of the ideological space may be lower than the rest of the voters who are included in these analyses.

5.4 Implications

The final section of this thesis considers implications on the study of ideology, on survey research, and in the context of British politics specifically.

5.4.1 Implications for the study of ideology

This thesis suggests that the way people think about themselves in the left-right space has changed over time. Cultural values are increasingly important in predicting someone's left-right self-placement, and this may imply that cultural issues are increasingly important to how voters view political competition overall. If someone moves their left-right self-placement in line with their cultural values, then from a spatial interpretation of party competition, they may be less likely to vote for parties close to them in the economic dimension. Instead, cultural issues may be more important to party choice.

In the earlier time period (2014) data analysed in Chapter 2, it seemed that cultural values were most predictive for those on the right of the left-right self-placement scale. However, by the end of the period studied (2024) cultural values were aligned with left-right self-placement for those identifying on the left, too. This suggests that parties aiming to attract voters identifying on the left may have to promote culturally liberal policies *alongside* economically left policies. Meanwhile, for those identifying furthest to the right, economic values have become less correlated with this right-wing self-placement. This also suggests that there is an asymmetry in ideological coherence; those placing themselves on the left of the self-placement scale now appear much more ideologically coherent than those on the right. Discussion of the ideological coherence of voters should be aware of this nuance.

The findings of the second paper suggest that this increasing importance of the cultural dimension coincides with the divisions that the EU referendum crystallised or created within the two major political party bases. Party dealignment (and potentially realignment) during the last decade can be better understood through analysing the changing latent ideologies of voters, and the changing weight they appear to give to each issue dimension. As the left-right dimension might be seen as overarching and simplifying positions across multiple dimensions, that it increasingly reflects values on the cultural dimension may suggest that a replacement for the long-standing economic alignment between voters and parties is now emerging. The findings of the third paper, that priming voters on the economic dimension had no effect on left-right self-placement, perhaps suggests that this realignment cannot easily be undone by raising the salience of the economic dimension.

5.4.2 Implications for survey research

Political scientists should be mindful that the usage of the ‘left-right’ terminology among the mass public is dynamic, and therefore changes over time. This means changes in left-right self-placement over time may not reflect changes in positions, but instead changes in the importance of an issue dimension. While left-right self-placement should not be assumed to reflect someone’s economic positions, it remains important in reflecting where someone positions themselves with reference to an issue dimension they view as important. As left-right self-placement has shown to vary in the dimension it reflects across the left-right spectrum itself, it also should not necessarily be interpreted as a linear scale of ideology. Nevertheless, if the usage of the left-right scale is dynamic it may remain an important predictor of political behaviours, even in cases where the economic dimension of issues has become a less central component of political competition.

The final paper in this thesis explores the impact of priming one dimension of political issues on left-right self-placement. As the prime in this experiment is only a set of questions, and no additional information, the fact that this priming impacts left-right self-placement has

implications for how political scientists include questions on ideology. Including questions on multiple political issues may be helpful at capturing different dimensions of political conflict, but it could also impact how respondents answer the left-right question.

One way this could impact research results is through panel surveys which continue to use left-right self-placement questions over time. If the question preceding the left-right self-placement question changes between panels, for example, to include new issues, it is possible that the inclusion of these questions will cause changes in responses to the left-right self-placement question.

5.4.3 Implications for British politics

This thesis may be helpful in understanding how voters make choices between parties. Increasingly, vote switching in British politics seems to not be between parties on opposite ends of the political spectrum, but within party blocs - for example switching between 'Remain' parties or between 'Leave' parties, but not across this divide (Griffiths et al., 2026). The 'leave'/'remain' blocs are largely correlated with perceptions of parties as 'left' or 'right'. Therefore, understanding how voters think about themselves in the left-right space can be helpful for understanding the initial component of vote choice in a party bloc scenario - whether one is closer to the 'left' parties or 'right' parties. The findings of this thesis suggest that for many with left-authoritarian operational ideology, they are likely to choose between 'right' parties as this is where they place themselves in the left-right space, regardless of their left-wing economic values. This may limit the appeal that any left-wing party has to these left-authoritarian voters, even if left-wing parties are closer to left-authoritarian voters on economic values.

Throughout 2025, the radical right party Reform UK has improved in its polling performance, so that, as of around June 2025, it has been leading the polls. Reform UK is largely an anti-immigration party, having renamed itself from The Brexit Party after the EU left the UK. That the cultural dimension seems so significant explains both the large levels of support,

but also strong opposition, towards a party which says little about economic issues. Many prospective voters for Reform UK are relatively centrist or even left-wing on economic issues. Some (including those within the Labour party) might assume that the Labour party could win these voters by raising the salience of economic issues, an issue dimension over which left-authoritarians are perhaps closer to the Labour party than they are to Reform UK. However, the findings in chapter 4 suggest this would be difficult, as priming left-authoritarians on the economic dimension made no difference to their left-right self-placement.

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